



YELENA KATERLI

The Long Road

Chapter One

1

NIKOLAI Zhukov and Andrei Korolev decided that they would take jobs in the same town.

They had grown up together, neighbours in a cramped Moscow flat; it was inconceivable that they should go different ways now. And really, there was not the least reason why they should: they left college at the same time, and while Nikolai was putting the final touches to the design he was submitting for his engineer's diploma, Andrei was preparing to sit for his finals.

In Moscow, spring was in full course but the two friends were insensible to its breath. They did not notice the snow melt, the trees blur darkly in the April showers, the planting of the tulip bulbs in the city gardens. Day and night they stuck to their books, forgetting meal-times, and very likely they would still have been going about in winter coats and fur hats had Nikolai's mother not put their caps out on the hall table, taken their raincoats out of the skip and hung them up beside the mirror.

The spring took Nikolai completely by surprise the day he received his diploma and with it a job. When he had signed the necessary papers, he went out of doors feeling prouder and happier than he had ever felt in his life, and it was then that he suddenly noticed that the sun was burning hot, that the passers-by were wearing gay, light-coloured clothes and that down the middle of the street moved a water-spraying car whose

jets shot right up to the pavement. For a few moments Nikolai looked at this car as if he were seeing it for the first time in his life, then laughing happily he walked aimlessly on.

Stopping outside a book shop, he took his papers out of his pocket and glanced through them again.

"Nikolai Zhukov, mechanical engineer.' H'm, that's something!"

He assumed a dignified air and straightened his shoulders. His glance fell on the shop window. Against a background of brown, red and green bindings he saw a lanky, spare figure in a tight-fitting faded mackintosh and a cap that was much too young for him tilted on the back of his head.

Nikolai frowned and straightened that cap. Putting the papers back into his pocket, he looked around, wondering how to lend something to his appearance more in keeping with his present situation. The window of the next shop displayed a plaster head of a young man with a broad-brimmed blue hat on it. Noting the solid look of this young man, Nikolai marched into the shop and bought the blue hat with the broad brim without asking to be shown any others.

"No need to wrap it up," he told the shop assistant shyly. "Wrap this up instead."

"This" was the cap which he snatched off his shock of thick fair hair. The dark-blue hat lay lightly and attractively on his head; as she wrapped up the cap, the girl assistant said politely:

"You look much better in a hat."

Nikolai stole a sidelong glance at the mirror. Yes, the hat changed him out of all recognition. He had suddenly become stern. Even his nose seemed to turn up less. The mackintosh did not look so tight across the shoulders.

He left the shop feeling much more self-confident and grown-up than a few minutes earlier. Not Kolya Zhukov, the only son of a school-teacher called Maria Mikhailovna Zhukova, not the undergrad who but the day before had been waiting anxiously for his exam results, but a man about to set out on serious work in state service was walking along a Moscow street. He walked with steady unhurried gait among people hastening about their everyday business, quite unaware that the young man in the shabby mackintosh that was too small for him would be leaving in a few days' time for the distant Urals to build machines that no one had ever built before.

Taking another look at himself in the shop window, Nikolai wondered what Nina would say to the hat. She might approve of it, she might simply not notice the change in his attire, or perhaps she would dislike it, the way she had disliked that suede jacket with the zip fastener.

That time he had thrown the suede jacket away, or, to be more exact, he had given it to a fellow who had been very glad to have it. Nina, of course, did not know that. Nikolai's mother, incidentally, was delighted.

"It made you look like a clown, and anyway it was utterly useless," she said. "Let's in the rain, but doesn't let the air through in hot weather; it's tight in the back and flops like a sack in front. That grey sports jacket of yours looks much smarter."

The fact of the matter, of course, was not that she liked the grey sports jacket which an old dressmaker of hers had cut out of a summer coat, but that the suede jacket was a present to Nikolai from his father whose name was also Nikolai Zhukov, who also was an engineer, and who had left his wife and son many years ago. That Nikolai Zhukov had another family now; he lived in Moscow, worked in some head office and hardly ever met his former wife.



Would his father congratulate him on his degree or not? Nikolai at once felt angry with himself for the thought. As if he needed his congratulations! They got on perfectly well without him, did not miss him, tried never to speak of him and now, if you please, he was expecting congratulations.

Setting his hat at a slight tilt and unbuttoning his mackintosh, Nikolai walked with an independent air into a large, well-appointed shop. On one of the shelves stood a white marble ink-stand that he had long coveted. Nikolai found this ink-stand very pretty: on a polished

base, between two ink-wells, reared a large bear on whose outstretched paws one was probably supposed to put one's pen after writing. In addition there was a tall vase for pencils and a blotter with another bear on it. He wanted to buy this for his mother.

Once, at the end of his school years, Nikolai and his class-mates bought a similar ink-stand as a present for their beloved maths teacher. The teacher was full of praise for it and told the boys that she would remember them when she corrected the home-work of the top class in the following year.

Nikolai's mother had no ink-stand. When she sat over the exercise books of an evening, she set an ordinary safety bottle of ink in front of her. Nikolai had long dreamed of giving her that handsome set. He resisted resolutely the shop assistant's suggestion that he should buy another, darker one instead.

"It's more practical. This one will show the ink-spots at once."

"But the white one's prettier," Nikolai insisted. "I'm buying it for a lady."

"Ah, if it's for ornament and not for use that's another matter. So it's a present. I'll pack it suitably."

He put the marble ink-stand in a cardboard box, tied it up with a red silk ribbon and handed it to Nikolai.

"Careful. It's heavy. The ribbon might snap."

Clutching the parcel to his chest Nikolai left the shop, made a dash for a bus and was home in a few minutes.

"Mother," he shouted as he burst into the room, "I'm going to the Urals. It's all settled."

There was no reply. The room was empty. On the table stood a glass of milk and a plate of sandwiches with a note beside them.

"Gone to school. Back at six. Be sure to drink the milk. Mother."

Without taking off his hat or coat Nikolai ate the sandwiches, drank the milk and wrote in Indian ink in a fine delicate hand on a small square card:

"Mother.

Thank you for my degree.

Your son."

Nikolai placed the box with his present in the middle of the table, attached the card to it, cleared away the plate and the empty glass, and went out. In the yard a little girl who lived next door looked at his hat with respect and delight, and when his unhurried sedate pace had taken him to the gate, cried shrilly behind his back:

"Zhuk¹ Zhukov's bought himself a hat. Look how he's swanking, girls."

Nikolai put on speed to get through the gate as soon as possible but the gate swung in his face, and into the yard burst Andrei.

"Everything fixed up? Where are you going?" Andrei asked him. "What town? What region? We've got an appointments board sitting, and I've got to decide where to go."

And suddenly it occurred to Nikolai that it would be difficult, maybe impossible, for Andrei to leave with him. Without replying to the questions, he stopped and looked at Andrei with a worried look on his face.

"Why don't you say something?" asked Andrei, surprised. "Show me your appointment card."

"You know, I didn't realize," muttered Nikolai, taking out his papers. "It's not a town; it probably doesn't even have a newspaper. Verkhnyaya Kamenka. It isn't even a district centre. . . ."

"No newspaper? Rot!" Andrei retorted, looking at his papers. "There's no such place that doesn't have a newspaper. Come along with me and we'll discuss everything on the way."

They went into the street and took a trolley-bus to the university. Only then did Andrei notice the new hat.

"Looks fine," he said, examining it carefully. "I think I'll get one like it for myself."

If anyone had asked Nikolai whom he cared for more—his mother or Andrei—it would have made him angry, but he would not have been able to reply. He loved his mother dearly. She ran his life, she asked nothing for herself, she devoted herself entirely to his interests.

Andrei, who had lost his mother when he was five years old, had the deepest respect for Nikolai's mother.

"When you've got a mother like yours you can easily live without an old man," Andrei had said long ago when he noticed Nikolai casting envious looks at his father. "Your mother earns as much as my dad does, and she doesn't wallop you. Oh, if you only knew the way my dad wallops me. With a strap. Word of honour he does."

This was pure bluff: Andrei's father had never raised his hand against him. But Andrei knew that Nikolai envied him his father and he wanted

¹ Zhuk—beetle.

to console him by any means. The more so because in the depth of his heart he considered that if a chap is to have only one parent then better let it be a father. Andrei was two years older than Nikolai and his attitude towards him was slightly protective. When they were at the same school, he helped Nikolai with his lessons. When sides were picked for a game of volley-ball in the yard, Andrei always chose Nikolai. And Nikolai, who generally could not stand any sort of coddling, never minded being helped by Andrei.

He was devoted to Andrei, the way a boy is to an elder brother. He brooked no criticism of Andrei even when it came from his mother or from Andrei's father. He imitated Andrei in everything. Even when Andrei vowed that he would be a poet, Nikolai started writing poetry on the quiet. And when the school Comsomol group appointed Andrei editor of the school newspaper, Nikolai asked to be taken on to the staff too.

"But it's not your line at all," he was told. "Why, your marks for literature are not particularly good. You'd do better to work in the physics circle; that suits you fine."

"You're supposed to assign Comsomol members to the work they want to do," objected Nikolai. "And what I want is to work on the wall newspaper."

He was put on the staff and made himself useful there: he was a good draughtsman and improved the lay-out of the paper.

But Andrei rejected the poems and articles that Nikolai submitted.

"They don't come off," he said, anxious not to offend his friend. "You know what I mean, they just don't come off. The words are there but the feeling and the thought aren't."

"How can that be?" Nikolai asked with alarm. "That means I must have a go at my theory or I'll not get into the philology faculty."

He had decided to go in for philology because that was what Andrei intended to do. It was inconceivable that he should study anywhere except where Andrei was studying.

Nikolai still had two more years at school when Andrei left. Everything was settled; Andrei had registered to take his university entrance exam and was beginning to glory in the name of student when something happened that upset all plans—Andrei's father broke his arm, the fracture turned out to be a serious one, the arm did not mend and Andrei decided that the moment had come when he would have to earn a living.

"Dad's pension plus my stipend don't come to enough," he said. "The university will wait; it's my duty to help my old man when he's ill."

Andrei's father, Boris Ivanovich Korolev, raised no objections; he didn't want the lad to have to count every rouble while he was studying. Let him work. He helped Andrei to get a factory job and was proud that the lad quickly learned to operate a milling machine and started to bring home a quite appreciable contribution to the family budget.

At first Andrei found the factory very much to his liking. Sociable by nature, he quickly found interesting people in the shop and took part in the most varied activities: he wrote articles for the factory paper; he joined the drama circle and even played the role of Chatsky in *Wit Works Woe*; he won a prize in the inter-shop sports contest; he lost his heart to a pretty dark-eyed girl timekeeper.

At home he would tell Nikolai what had happened during the day, and it always seemed to Nikolai that life at the factory was much more

interesting and happy than at school. Nikolai listened with envy; he was ready to leave school at once and go and work with Andrei. He would have done so had his mother not objected.

"Half-educated people are no use anywhere," she said. "No use in the factory either. There are people working who are trying to complete their education by going to evening classes and studying in colleges and technical schools, and here are you imagining that eight years' schooling is enough for you. First you finish school and then you can choose."

Nikolai probably would have entered the same factory and gone to work in the same shop as Andrei when he left school; but Andrei suddenly lost interest in the factory, in his milling machine and even in the dark-eyed girl timekeeper. He turned to writing poetry again, spent his evenings at the editorial office of the Comsomol paper where young poets sometimes gathered, and started talking about the university again.

"I'm not cut out for machinery," he admitted to Nikolai. "I've had enough of standing in front of a milling machine and doing the same thing day in, day out. Why, I'm working almost automatically, without having to think at all. To improve my work, invent something, reckon and calculate—no, not my cup of tea at all."

"But you were so interested in inventors and even wrote an article about them," said Nikolai. "It was a good article, too. Interesting."

"I know I did. But I didn't write about what they invented but how they did it. I'm not interested in machinery itself. I'm interested in it as the expression of man's ability, of his feelings even. Do you understand me? Nothing in the world would make me study machines, lathes, cranes. I'll go to the university as I meant to before. It's settled. Let's apply together."

Nikolai said nothing: he was a bad arguer. But during the previous two years he had grown used to the idea of working in a factory, had read many books about machinery, had dreamed of the day when he would build a complicated, powerful machine with his own hands. He would gladly have followed Andrei into the shop in order to work while studying at a technical college. But he was not willing to follow him to the university.

Nikolai did not go to the university. For the first time in his life he decided his fate for himself and entered a technical college. But though they studied apart, Andrei and Nikolai remained as good friends as ever. Nikolai met no one at college who could, in his opinion, be compared with Andrei. Andrei was his friend for life, a friend to whom he could reveal his inmost thoughts, who understood everything although he had quite different tastes and inclinations himself.

"The unity of opposites," Andrei's father joked about them. Indeed, their natures were quite different. Nikolai remained as indecisive, as timid even, as he was as a child; he lacked self-confidence; he hesitated long where Andrei decided at once. Nikolai did well at his studies but only by dint of stubborn perseverance, while Andrei grasped everything at once. Nikolai was racked with doubts about his knowledge or his ability to apply it. Andrei was always confident that everything he tackled would be successful.

Andrei was certain from the beginning that he would find work to do at the Verkhnyaya Kamenka factory.

"How on earth can we send you there? What are you going to do at that place?" one member of the appointments board asked him. "It would be much better for you to go to a town and work on the staff of a large newspaper."

"I can work on the factory newspaper," Andrei said. "I've had some experience of that. I worked on a factory paper for two years."

They shrugged their shoulders. They did not know whether that particular factory needed a newspaper man. They promised to get in touch with the Communist Party organization in the Urals and, with their agreement, to send Andrei to the factory he was so set on going to.

"How long will it take to get a decision?" Andrei enquired.

"Hard to say. . . . Maybe a fortnight, maybe less."

It did not suit Andrei to wait so long. He went to the post-office and pondered long over the text of a telegram which he wanted to be at once brief and convincing. After considerable effort he produced the following:

"Graduated with honours Moscow University. Party member since 1952. Desire work your factory on newspaper. Request your agreement. Andrei Korolev."

He addressed the telegram to the Communist Party organizer at the factory and, feeling quite certain that everything would turn out the way he wanted, went with Nikolai to buy a suitcase and various articles for the journey.

"Wait a bit. You may be wasting your money," said Nikolai as he watched Andrei choosing a rucksack. "You may not go, after all."

"I will," said Andrei confidently. "I've decided, haven't I? Don't forget that confidence spells success. If you want something, you've got to want it very badly; and if you want something badly, you've got to make an effort to get it. I want to go to the Urals and I'm going, you'll see."

Three days later he received a reply to his telegram:

"Come. There's a job for you. Party organizer Stoletov."

2

Nikolai and Andrei were polishing the floor in their rooms when the door-bell rang with a loud and compelling peel that resounded in the hall.

"That can't be a visitor, surely," said Andrei, wiping the sweat off his brow. "Open the door while I do this corner."

Shaking his foot clear of the polishing cloth, Nikolai tore into the hall. Stripped to the waist, with a towel wrapped round his head which he had just washed, he was not altogether prepared to receive visitors, but at this time of morning no one was likely to call except a fellow student. He flung open the door boldly.

Into the hall walked not a fellow student but a middle-aged, heavily-built man in a stylish light overcoat and a panama hat. Not recognizing the caller, Nikolai gaped at him blankly. Then he realized who it was. The colour rushed to his cheeks as he backed into the hat-stand.

"Hello, what's this? Just had a bath?" asked the visitor with a smile. "On your own here? Is your mother at work? Well, let me in, I can only stay a few moments."

Throwing an arm over Nikolai's shoulders, the caller shoved him forward and walked with assurance along the passage. His gestures, his voice, the way he was dressed were as compelling and self-confident as the ring with which he had announced his arrival. Nikolai walked on, vexed with the thought that he must look somewhat odd in his turban, with nothing on but a pair of shorts and his bare feet stained red by the floor polish.

A good thing our room's tidy, he reflected and decided that he would have to drop in on Andrei to put on some clothes.

"Excuse me, I'll be back in a moment," he said gruffly, shaking himself free of the visitor's grip. "Please go into our room."

He hurried into Andrei's room feeling upset, and pulled the door to behind him. Andrei went on waltzing about the room with his foot on the polishing cloth, whistling in time to his movements.

"Who's out there?" he asked. "Bring 'em in. Let them help polish the floor, damn them."

"Shut up," whispered Nikolai. "It's my old man. Where's your ski suit? I'll wear it if you don't mind."

He slipped on the suit, snatched the turban off his head and ran his hands through his hair. For some reason he found it disgusting that his father should catch him looking like this. He would have liked to meet his father wearing a new suit and doing something worth while, reading a serious technical book, for instance.

"Put on some slippers; your feet are as red as a goose's," said Andrei, noticing how upset Nikolai was as he tidied himself up. "Is he going to stay long? Not till the evening, surely? He'll spoil Maria Mikhailovna's mood altogether."

"He said just for a few moments. Join us, please. I don't like being alone with him."

"I'll come as soon as I've dressed. But what on earth are you getting so excited about? Be tough with him, you're as good as he is now. You're an engineer yourself."

"What, d'you think I'm frightened of him?" Nikolai retorted, bridle suddenly. "I just find him disgusting. Walks in as if he owned the place, without being invited. Why, I might not want to see him."

"All right then, treat him like that, so that he knows you don't want to see him."

Zhukov senior really did behave as if he owned the place. He roamed about the room poking unceremoniously into every corner. It was a large light spotlessly clean room. Nikolai and his mother often moved the furniture, trying to make it as cosy and comfortable as possible. Now, they maintained, they had turned the place into a complete apartment. One corner, screened by a sideboard and a wardrobe, was "Mum's bedroom." Here stood a bed covered with a snow-white counterpane, and a bedside table with a small lamp, a book and a photograph of Niko'ai in a round frame. Along another wall was arranged the "drawing-room" furniture—a piano, a rack for music, an easy chair. Near the window was the "study"—book-shelves, a writing desk and the divan bed on which Nikolai slept. A dining-table with four chairs round it and a lamp with a large shade made up the "dining-room."

Nikolai and his mother loved their "apartment." They entertained their friends there and were delighted to hear Maria Zhukova's friends and the students who came to visit them from the hostel say how roomy

and comfortable the place was. Now, however, as he watched his father walk out of his mother's "bedroom" and bump against the table as he stepped into the "drawing-room," Nikolai felt with vexation that the room must seem cramped and poor to his father.

His father had a large flat in one of the new well-arranged houses; he drove in his own car; he owned a cottage in the country. Nikolai knew all that, although neither he nor his mother had ever visited his father's new family.

"You've got this place arranged splendidly," his father said with a note of approval as he sank to the divan in the "study." "Very bright, the way you've fixed the furniture. When did you buy the piano?"

"Mother hires the piano," said Nikolai. "She got it three years ago."

He remained standing, leaning against the sideboard, not looking at his father. He tried to suppress the nervousness that was gaining mastery over him, for he despised himself for it.

"So you and I are colleagues now," his father said, smiling. "I congratulate you most heartily. A friend of mine who teaches at your college told me how well you've done. You have a liking for the exact sciences, I see. Well done. You take after your father."

After his father, indeed! Not at all. His father must have forgotten that his former wife, Nikolai's mother, taught physics and maths at school. If it was true that parents passed on their abilities to their children, then his mother alone was responsible for his success in the exact sciences.

"Mother helped me enormously," said Nikolai, his face paling. In his embarrassment, he held his hands behind his back. "She knows a lot about higher mathematics. . . . She is going to present a thesis for her M. Sc.," he added, watching his father's face.

Nikolai's father had a M. Sc. in engineering. He had studied throughout his youth, and Nikolai's mother had worked to make it possible for him to study undisturbed. Nikolai had been told that by Boris Ivanovich a long time ago when as a schoolboy he had looked down on his mother's profession—a schoolma'am, if you please.

"Your mother could have become a professor," Boris Ivanovich had told Nikolai angrily. "But first she made a professor of your father, and now it's you she's providing with food and clothes and the chance to study. She never took a kopeck from your father, refused alimony when he thrust it at her. The pride of the woman! You dare speak of your mother again like that and you'll know what my belt feels like."

Now, as he told his father how his mother was preparing to present her thesis, Nikolai recalled Boris Ivanovich's words and the look that he cast his father was full of hostility.

"Her thesis, eh?" his father said, his interest aroused. "That's the thing. There's no sense in a woman of her ability wasting herself teaching in a secondary school. Like using a three-hundred-ton press to make hair pins."

The voice was well-intentioned but Nikolai felt that his father was speaking about his mother's work with a lack of respect.

"School children are not hair pins," he said tartly. "And then Mother did not have the means to study. Now I shall try to see that she has."

He felt a strong desire to add something that would hurt his father but could not bring himself to the point: that wretched timidity tied his tongue. Even what he had already said seemed to him unpardonably rude:

But his father apparently had not noticed the rudeness. He went on smiling, his voice carried a gentle note, his every gesture expressed satisfaction that he was sitting there and chatting with his grown-up son.

"Let me see your diploma," Nikolai's father asked, paying no attention to the boy's remark. "I must say it's interesting to have a son who is an engineer."

He questioned Nikolai about his appointment. The factory, he said, was an excellent school for a young engineer but not one in which too much time ought to be spent.

"Work there for a year or two and come back to Moscow. To a scientific research institute or a head office, or to the Ministry. Or you can go in for teaching and go on studying yourself at the same time. When you get to that point, come straight to me. I'll do everything I can for you, and that's a lot." He rose from the divan, walked across to Nikolai and laid his hands on his son's shoulders. "My son's quite a big fellow now," he said and there was tenderness in his voice. "Well, lad, things haven't been as they should have between us but I think we can put that right. I'll try and help you a bit. There's a man I know at that Verkhnyaya Kamenka factory. I'll give you a letter to him and he'll smooth the way for you. . . . And now you'll get something from me for graduating." Turning back to the divan he unclasped a large leather brief-case and drew out of it a white cardboard box. "Here you are," he said, handing the box to Nikolai. "Wear it, don't lose it, and be as accurate in your life as it is."

"Thank you," muttered Nikolai. "But I don't really need a present. . . ."

He turned the box over and over in his hands, not knowing what to do with it, while his father waited with a happy smile on his lips.

"Come on, open it, open it," he said impatiently, jogging Nikolai towards the table. "Bring it over here."

Nikolai laid the box on the table, opened it and saw a beautiful gold wristlet watch. The watch was flat and small with a black dial-plate on which the squat pale-hued figures stood out clearly.

"Like it?" Nikolai's father asked joyfully as he watched his son. "Let me put it on your wrist for you."

"But I've got a watch," said Nikolai, pulling back the sleeve of the ski-jacket. "It's a splendid timekeeper. I've had it over a year."

"That's a watch for a student, a *Pobeda*," said his father, reaching to undo the strap on Nikolai's wrist. "This is one for an engineer, it's a *Moser*, guaranteed accurate to the second."

He adjusted the watch on Nikolai's wrist and gave his hand a friendly tap. Then he caught sight of the ink-stand on the table. Propped up against the bear was the card with its message: "Mother. Thank you for my degree. Your son." Nikolai's eyes crossed his father's; he blushed. Why had Mother left that card out? He didn't at all want this stranger to see the terms they were on.

If his father were to say anything insulting, he'd fling his watch back at him. And what was more, turn him out of the house. No, he would leave himself. . . .

But his father said nothing insulting; on the contrary, he praised Nikolai for being attentive to his mother, and said Nikolai ought to have bought some flowers as well but that he would take care of that omission himself.

"Like to come along with me in the car?" he asked. "It's waiting outside and there's a flower-shop quite close. There's no need to change," he added, his eyes on Nikolai. "You look a real sportsman like that."

He was most reluctant to go with his father but it was difficult to refuse. Nikolai shifted his weight from one foot to the other, not knowing what to do; but at that moment Andrei came to his rescue. Andrei looked as spruce and handsome as an actor in his light grey suit, silk shirt and bright tie, his hair smooth, his face clean-shaven.

"How do you do, Nikolai Mikhailovich," he said brightly. "Don't you recognize me? I'm Andrei Korolev."

"The neighbour's son! Not really!" the other exclaimed as he shook hands with Andrei. "Well, my lad, you've shot up all right. Probably taller than your dad, and he, if I'm not mistaken, is no little 'un."

He sat down again and began to ask Andrei what his college was and where he was going to work. His questions were those of a man who was really interested in the answers; he recalled the times when he lived in that house and when Andrei and Nikolai were still Young Pioneers—one of them somewhat senior, the other quite small.

"Yours is a fine friendship, my boys," he said with a sigh. "I envy you such a friendship. Take care of it, it's worth something."

Recollecting that it was time for him to leave, Nikolai's father picked up his brief-case and removed from his pocket a thick fountain pen.

"Give me an envelope," he said to Nikolai. "I'll write that letter for you while I'm here."

On a page of his writing-pad with the letter-heading of his office on it he scribbled a few lines which he then read aloud:

"Dear Comrade Kovalev,

"This is to recommend to you my son who is starting his career as an engineer. Please be nice to him, keep an eye on him and help him as much as you can. I'll write to you under separate cover about the way the examination of your design is going. It has come back to me now. We are reaching our final decision on it."

He sealed the envelope and addressed it to Arseni Mikhailovich Kovalev, marking it personal.

"Here you are." He handed the letter to Nikolai. "If I am any judge of humanity, he will do his best to help you. Deliver this letter as soon as you arrive. With my regards. . . . Well, I must be off. We shall have to postpone our visit to the florist's together. I've no time. I'll do it another way."

He took his leave of the two young men who accompanied him to the door.

"Come and see me before you leave," he reminded Nikolai. "Remember me to your mother. I'll come to see her myself, though."

"As if she needs to see you," Nikolai mumbled when the door had closed behind his father. "We do not invite you, that's certain."

"What's the good of mumbling like that after he's gone," asked Andrei. "You should have told him that to his face. But d'you know, I like him: he's a cheerful, kind-hearted old chap."

Kind-hearted? Had he been kind-hearted when while away on a business trip he sent his mother a letter saying that his heart "had been set

afame by the torch of a new love"? Had he been kind-hearted when his wife, overwhelmed by the shock, lay ill in hospital? His "kind-heartedness" caused him to forget Nikolai for long years, to overlook his birthdays, his promotions at school. No one, not even Andrei, not even his mother, knew how much Nikolai had longed for a letter from his father on New Year's Day, a greeting for May Day or the anniversary of the October Revolution.

No, he would never forgive his father.

"A kind-hearted old chap," he said gloomily. "To hell with him."

"What's the letter for?"

"Using his influence. What do you think, shall I take it with me or not?"

He asked the question spitefully, certain in advance that Andrei would be indignant. But Andrei said that the letter could be taken: what if suddenly the factory gave him a chilly welcome? An influence might be useful then.

"You can take the letter yourself. I don't intend to make use of any influence of his."

Then he remembered his present. The gold wrist-band felt cold on his skin, the dial-plate flashed below his sleeve.

"A graduation present," he said, showing the watch to Andrei. "Like it?"

"Let's see. It's a beauty. Take it off and let me take a closer look at it. That's a present for you! And you not satisfied with anything. I knew I was right when I said he was a kind-hearted old chap."

Andrei examined the watch with care, admired the luminous hands and figures and the little dial for the second hand. Andrei said that this would help Nikolai very much in his work because he might have to time operations or processes and then he would need to use his father's present.

"I shan't take it with me. Anyway, I'm going to give it to Mother."

"What for? It's a man's watch. Don't be an ass, and stop trying to carry all the troubles of the world on your shoulders: it doesn't go at all with your snub-nose. Go and get dressed. We're expecting visitors and you haven't even got any socks on."

But before the guests arrived, before Nikolai's mother returned from school, a messenger came from the florist's with a huge basket of flowers.

"They are for Maria Mikhailovna Zhukova," said the messenger. "Is she in?"

Then, learning that Maria Mikhailovna was not at home, the messenger handed the basket to Andrei and said:

"Be so kind as to deliver it, young man. And there's a little note in this envelope, too."

Andrei wanted to arrange the flowers on the writing desk but Nikolai objected and stood the basket on the bedside table after removing the books and his photograph from it. There, behind the wardrobe, the basket was not so noticeable.

Now it was really time to dress. Especially as Nina might arrive. The thought that Nina might soon be here caused Nikolai's mood to change at once. His father, his childhood miseries, his sense of injury—

that all belonged to the past. The real thing was Nina, the journey to the Urals, the start of an independent life.

"The day to come, what is it bearing?" he sang out in a wild, cracked voice. "In vain into the darkness staring, I try to glimpse it." Andrei, have you got my razor? I'm coming to tidy up my lovely mug."

And he dashed into the kitchen for some shaving-water.

3

Nikolai's mother took a suitcase out of the store-room with a sigh. The boys would soon be leaving. However often she postponed packing her son's things, that packing had to be done, and, though she tried not to think of it, the moment of parting drew nearer. Maria Mikhailovna could not imagine how she was going to live on her own. The room would feel empty, there would be nobody to look after. . . .

"Don't take on so, neighbour," Andrei's father consoled her. He had noticed how red and swollen were Maria Mikhailovna's eyes. "We're not sending our sons off to war, it's not for ever."

But his flippancy belied his own feelings.

"Verkhnyaya Kamenka Machine Works," he said, eyeing sceptically his son's papers. "Never heard of the place. I've heard of the Urals Machine Works, they're famous. And I've heard of Magnitogorsk; who hasn't? Chelyabinsk Tractor Works, too. They're magnificent factories. But you've not been lucky enough to get to one of those places, lads."

These words made no impression on Andrei. Nikolai, however, looked thoughtful. One day he said to Andrei:

"D'you know, I went today to the college reading-room and looked through all the newspapers for the past month. I didn't find a word about Verkhnyaya Kamenka. Drew a complete blank, except that in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* I found a short item about work in the hostels for young workers being below par. Perhaps your father's right."

Andrei was not so easily put out of countenance.

"Don't be such a funk, Zhukov. It's up to you now to see the place gets a better press."

He started packing the books he had decided to take with him.

"Why are you taking so many? You'll need another suitcase for them," Nikolai complained.

"Another? Two more, you mean. But don't worry. I'll put the books in the luggage van."

So the packing went on, with their parents helping as best they could. Maria Mikhailovna looked through the linen, sewed on buttons and put marks on the handkerchiefs. She packed everything that she thought they would need to set themselves up; thermos flasks, glasses, plates and cutlery, a new table-cloth.

She still saw Nikolai and Andrei as boys who were not capable of organizing their daily lives for themselves. She secretly pictured to herself "her boys" with holes in their socks, rumpled shirts and grubby handkerchiefs. Who was going to see that everything was washed and mended? Who would see that Nikolai did not forget to take his bath regularly and that Andrei ate a good breakfast of a morning and did not go off to work on an empty stomach? In Moscow that was her job, but there. . . . As

she sat over the open suitcase she even considered asking to be transferred to a post in Verkhnyaya Kamenka. But how could she break with a school where she had worked for almost a quarter of a century?

Maria Mikhailovna worried and dithered; but for Andrei's father she would have been at a loss what to do.

"That's all quite unimportant, my dear woman," said Boris Ivanovich when he saw the pile of things she had got ready for packing. "They don't need those plates or the holders for the tea glasses. They don't need us to look after them either. They're starting out in life on their own, and they are starting the right way. I'm sure of that. They are good lads and no fools. They've absolutely no further need of our guidance."

The small china tea-pot that Maria Mikhailovna was holding slipped out of her hands and broke. She laughed sadly and picked up the pieces.

"That tea-pot wasn't fated to go to the Urals, I can see. Perhaps you're right, I'll have to re-pack."

Together they re-sorted their sons' things and relieved the overfull suitcase of some of its contents. But even what was left was too much for the boys. They filled the case up again with books, laying their clothes in thin layers between them.

That evening, with the packing still undone, Maria Mikhailovna went into the kitchen to make tea and Boris Ivanovich sat smoking at the open window. A dark sky spread over Moscow, the street noises died down, the lights in the windows went out one by one.

"You haven't got much longer in Moscow," said Andrei's father, "so have a good last look at it."

From the window nothing could be seen except the street lights, the sparks from the tram-car overhead wires, and the faint remote stars in the dark sky. But Andrei and Nikolai, standing beside each other, saw everything that the darkness hid: the old mansion opposite—which they referred to as "Tolstoyan"—the outline of the new skyscraper in the distance, the tops of the trees in the boulevard near by. They had known this nearer view since they were children, had grown accustomed to it from the earliest days of their lives; and now they had to say good-bye to this beloved view.

Maria Mikhailovna entered the room quietly and placed a tea-pot and a tray of tea-things on the table. She steadied the rattling glasses with her hand, for she felt the silence in the room to be too significant to disturb.

Nikolai turned and beckoned his mother to the window. She sat on the window-sill, carefully folded back the lace curtain and drew her son to her. Nikolai laid an arm over her shoulders, and felt her tremble at his gentle touch. Andrei was leaning with his elbows on the back of the chair where his father sat. All four of them gazed silently out of the open window as if something miraculous were happening outside.

But there was no miracle—just the sigh of a warm breeze, someone hurrying across the courtyard, whistling a gay little tune, and from the street the honk of a passing car and the tinkle of tram-car bells. From afar the wind bore the faint chimes of the Kremlin clock.

"It's good thing there's radio," said Andrei, bending his head towards his father. "We'll tune in to Moscow there in the Urals and hear the chimes and picture Red Square in a flash. Moscow will seem near."

"Moscow's not far from the Urals, wireless or not," said Boris Ivano-

vich. He could feel his son's chin nuzzling against his head. "Get in a plane and you can be home in no time. I've never been to the Urals, I'm a Moscovite, a stay-at-home. But I don't think of the Urals as far away."

"Will you come and see me during your holidays?" asked Andrei, nudging his father's head with his chin. "I bet you don't."

"They're sending me to Kislovodsk. I ought to 'take the waters,' they say. So I shan't be able to come and see you."

"What about you, Mum? Will you come?" asked Nikolai.

"I will," replied Maria Mikhailovna firmly. "I'll certainly come."

"Don't you go," said Boris Ivanovich. "Let them live on their own and find their bearings. I thought you were intending to go and stay with your sister on the Volga. Go there. You need to rest, not to keep house for two young men. Let them settle down and spread their wings. And you and I shall watch and see what kind of wings they've got, eagles' or midges'."

He raised his head, looked at Andrei, lighted another cigarette and went on:

"You've received a lot from the state, my lads. Now it's up to you to repay your debt. If you don't, you're not worth a kopeck. You'd better keep out of my way in that case."

As Andrei listened to his father's words, he reflected how hard it was going to be for him to be left on his own. As for Maria Mikhailovna, she would miss Nikolai terribly. But both she and his father were bearing up wonderfully. . . .

"Do you hear what Boris Ivanovich is saying?" Maria Mikhailovna asked her son.

She pressed her cheek against his hand which lay over her shoulder. But Nikolai did not notice: he started telling how well those graduates from the college who had left the year before for factories in the Urals and Siberia were doing.

"They're no midges. They are all foremen or in charge of shops or sections. One of them has even been appointed chief engineer at a small factory. And what about those who stayed in Moscow or went to work in Leningrad or in other big centres? They didn't get any independence at all. There are plenty of experienced men here."

"Don't mean to tell me you're thinking of becoming a chief engineer?" asked Andrei.

"There's no harm in thinking about it," retorted Nikolai. "Aren't you thinking of becoming a famous poet?"

They started arguing the way they did when they were schoolboys. Boris Ivanovich silently stared at the windows in the house opposite. The light went out in one of them; in another a faint greenish light replaced the bright glare. The sparks from the tram-car wires died in the night, silence and coolness rose from the boulevard, footsteps in the street became rarer and rarer.

"There's just one thing I want to say to you, lads," Boris Ivanovich said. "Always be true to your people. Think above all of how you can work for the good of your people. Measure every step you take with that rule—whether it's good for the people, for the state. You'll not go wrong then, believe me."

"What are you telling us that for, Boris Ivanovich?" asked Nikolai. "We know that, don't we?"

"Yes, you know it, you know it," replied Boris Ivanovich with a chuckle. "But I'm old-fashioned. I haven't forgotten my proverbs, and there's a proverb that runs: 'Repetition is the mother of knowledge.'"

He rose to his feet and switched on the light. A dazzlingly bright lamp shone over the table. It revealed the meat-pie that Maria Mikhailovna had found time to bake for supper.

They all sat round the table.

"To your good health, lads, to your work. Make Maria Mikhailovna and me feel proud of you," said Boris Ivanovich. "Make your colleges and your comrades be proud of you."

They sat round the table for a long time. And when the supper things had been cleared away, they spread a map of the Urals on the cloth and searched hard for Verkhnyaya Kamenka. They found it on the banks of a large lake out of which flowed the river Kamenka, a mere hair's breadth on the map. The lake was ringed with mountains; Andrei who had read a few books about the Urals announced that the name of the river and the factory indicated that the region was mountainous because in the Urals the word *kamen* meant mountain.

"Kamen.¹ That's very fitting and poetical," he said. "I like that very much: 'Denezhkin Kamen,' 'Zolotoi Kamen,' 'Yermak Kamen' . . . Oh, the mountains, the mountains. Do you remember that passage in *Cossacks*, Nikolai?"

"No, I don't," said Nikolai. "I remember Lukashka but not the mountains."

"Lukashka! And do you mean to say you don't remember that bit about the way Olenin was struck by the mountains? How the beauty of the mountains was described as 'stern and stately'? About the inner, solemn voice which kept reminding him: 'And the mountains'? I remember it all right."

He screwed up his eyes and slowly, word for word, repeated the text of Tolstoy's story of the Caucasus:

"Beyond the Terek rises the smoke from a Tartar village . . . and the mountains! The sun has risen and glitters on the Terek now visible beyond the reeds . . . and the mountains! From the village comes a Tartar wagon, and women, beautiful young women, pass by . . . and the mountains!"

"I remember it: I reread it all this morning. . . . And you've never looked at it again. You and your Lukashka!"

Boris Ivanovich looked at his son with a smile. What an eagle Koro-lev the fitter had reared! Of course, he still had a lot of idle thoughts in his head, all sorts of dreams, but they were the right sort of dreams, ones which he thoroughly approved of. All the same, he did not give voice to his approval, only frowned and said:

"Mountains are all right in their place but it's high time we went to bed. Maria Mikhailovna and I will have to be off to work soon."

Indeed, the night was over and the electric light was burning quite needlessly: the room had been full of daylight for a long time.

"Do you feel like sleeping, Nikolai?" Andrei asked. "I don't. Let's go out for a walk."

They left the house. The clang of the closing gate sounded hollow in the early morning silence of the street. The trams had not yet started to

¹ In Russian, "*kamen*" means "stone."

run; there were no trains rumbling deep under ground; the cranes, glinting in the dawn light, hung motionless over the high frameworks of new buildings.

There had been a shower during the night, and the morning was fresh and cool. The damp, rain-washed pavements, the trees with their leaves still dripping, the stillness of the deserted streets—all this was solemn and beautiful. The two friends walked side by side, saying nothing to each other but letting their eyes rest on the same things. The school they both went to. The building where the Comsomol district committee had its offices; that was where both of them had received their Comsomol membership cards. The stop where they used to take the tram to the Bolshoi Theatre, to the Art Theatre, into the centre of the city.

In the evenings there were always people at that tram stop, but now no one was waiting. An elderly woman with a sleepy, toil-worn face was cleaning the points.

"Good morning," Andrei said to her and raised his new hat.

The woman looked at him in silence, ignored his greeting and went on working. Not that Andrei minded: he was carried away by the unusualness of everything and had greeted the woman for no other reason than to break the silence.

"We're leaving Moscow," said Nikolai. "Surely you must feel sad about that."

"I do, a bit," Andrei conceded. "But it's not for ever, is it? We'll come here, we'll write, we'll talk over the phone. Perhaps *Pravda* will print an article of mine. Perhaps my poems will be published here. Wherever I am or whatever I'm doing, Moscow will be at my side. Where are we going? To the Red Square?"

Nikolai nodded and on they walked, shoulder to shoulder, keeping in step as though they were marching in a demonstration. A delicate film of mist hung over the square. The flowers in the borders behind the Mausoleum emitted a fragrant scent. The clock flung its chimes to the pale blue sky.

"Listen," said Andrei, snatching off his hat. "Listen to that."

Unconsciously, Nikolai too bared his head and listened, thinking that the time was close at hand when he would hear the Kremlin chimes only over the wireless, only at midnight. Then he realized that in the Urals there was a two-hour difference in time and that it would be two o'clock in the morning when he heard the midnight chimes through his dreams.

He wanted to mention it to Andrei but, glancing at him, kept silent. Andrei stood with a pensive, dreamy look on his face, plunged in some reflection and Nikolai did not want to disturb him. Perhaps he was composing a poem.

But Andrei was not composing poetry. He was simply listening to the chimes of the clock and delighting in their clear high ring. There was not a thought in his mind. The early morning was so lovely, the air so fresh, a pigeon cooed in the cornice overhead and a girl who was walking by looked at him and smiled. . . .

The chimes ceased and a solemn silence reigned over the square, broken only by the distant steps of the hurrying girl and the hum of an approaching watering-car which was flinging broad jets of water to either side.

"It's marvellous," said Andrei and put on his hat.

They recalled the demonstrations in which they had walked together, the times they had seen Stalin.

"The first time I saw him was before I started going to school," said Nikolai. "It was the Seventh of November and beginning to rain. Stalin stood there with his head uncovered. Before that I marched in a May Day demonstration but I didn't see him that time. . . . It's a strange thing, but now I don't feel that he is dead. For all the time that I can remember in my life he was there. And then suddenly his name appeared on the front of the Mausoleum. . . ."

Andrei stood looking grave and solemn, gazing somewhere above the Mausoleum, at the parapet of the Kremlin walls, at the sky where an aeroplane flew leaving a thin white trail behind it.

"I hate death," he said abruptly, his eyes on the plane. "I despise it. I deny it. You say that all the time you can remember, he was there. But isn't it true that Lenin was there all the time we can remember? It is, though his name went up on the Mausoleum long before either of us was born. There is no such thing as death, Nikolai. All you have to do is to live in such a way that death is powerless to destroy you."

"Of course death is powerless to destroy Lenin or Stalin," said Nikolai. "Or any other genius like Pushkin, for instance. Or Mendeleyev or Tolstoy. But whether you deny death or not, it exists. Millions of people have perished without leaving a trace and no one ever remembers them."

Nikolai sounded offended; Andrei suddenly flared up.

"No one disappears without a trace," he said, looking away from the plane. "For instance, I don't believe I shall. I don't expect to be remembered like Pushkin but I'm living in an age when to leave nothing behind you in life means you are completely worthless."

He spoke hotly, passionately. Then he smote Nikolai hard on the back and said:

"Cheer up, old man. We've got another hundred years to live. But we've only another hour to walk. Let's go on."

They walked to the Lenin Library and stopped on its broad steps, two young men in identical new hats, in their best suits, tall, well-built and each in his own way, attractive. Andrei had black hair and dark eyes, his brow was broad and bold, his mouth well defined and slightly haughty. He held his head thrown back a little and his shoulders lay in such a way that his powerful young neck was thrust forward. Young men like him put one in mind of an eagle.

That could not be said of Nikolai. With his light-hued eyes, his silky, fair hair, his figure which though strong still had the narrow shoulders of youth, he was of a retiring disposition and was less noticeable than his dashing friend.

"I'm an ass, Kolya," Andrei said suddenly. "I must be off to the works. I've an appointment with an editor. You go on alone, I'll leave you."

He left with his quick, energetic stride, completely absorbed in the impending appointment. Nikolai watched him go on his way and noticed how two girls who were climbing the steps of the library turned round and looked after Andrei.

He decided that it was time for him to be off, too. He would walk to the clinic to see Nina.

Nikolai had had the thought of saying good-bye to Nina on his mind all night.

How terribly difficult and complicated his relations with Nina were: he liked her enormously, he was in love with her, but he could not muster his courage to tell her about it. Did Nina share his feelings? She was different each time he met her; her moods changed so swiftly that he was unable to place any real confidence in them.

It was at a New Year party at the university that he first met Nina.

At first he did not get a very clear picture of her features: round, rosy-cheeked face, full lips and eyes whose look was at once gay and exacting. She came up to him with Andrei and said decisively: "Your friend tells me that you don't like dancing. That's impossible. Come and dance with me."

Nikolai took fright and wanted to avoid this exacting young woman but she grasped his arm firmly and together they joined the broad stream of dancers. Then she said she felt thirsty and bought herself a bottle of lemonade at the buffet. And then she said the room was stuffy and went with Nikolai for a stroll on Manezhnaya Square. When the party was over, she thrust her cloak-room tag into his hand and when he had brought her coat, let him walk her home.

A few days later they met on the skating-rink.

"Look, there's your medico friend skating over there." Andrei had said. "Let's go that way."

Nikolai felt embarrassed but at the same time delighted by Andrei's "your": Nina had appealed to him from the moment they met but, as far as he could remember, he had not breathed a word of that to Andrei. In fact, Andrei had guessed it for himself and had decided to help his shy young friend. He found out that Nina spent her evenings at the skating-rink so he dragged Nikolai along there. He gave Nikolai a ticket for the theatre, telling him that it was a spare one because he was joining a group that was going over the new university building. Nikolai went to the theatre and found Nina sitting in the next seat. Later, Nina called on Andrei with a friend to borrow a book. And after that Andrei declared: "Now it's up to you to take the initiative. From what I know she doesn't dislike you."

But Nikolai was still uncertain whether Nina disliked him or not. They met frequently, they went for walks together through Moscow, they went to the cinema. Nikolai met Nina's parents and Nina paid several visits to his place; Maria Mikhailovna liked her.

"You ought to learn to be more resolute, like Nina," Nikolai's mother told him. "She's a girl who knows what she wants to attain in life and who is going to attain it, that's clear at once. That's a man's trait, while you, if you don't mind my saying so, have a bit of girlishness in your nature."

Nikolai tried to be more resolute but nothing came of it. How could he speak decisively to Nina when each meeting found her even more changeable? One time she would read poetry in a sad, dreamy voice or hum some melancholy tune, another time she would be caustic and mocking, with a sting in every remark. Sometimes she would affectionately call him Nikolushka but when he plucked up courage and was on the point of revealing his true feelings for her she would flare up about nothing

in particular, compare him with other young men and prove to him that while they were real people he was a spineless sort of fellow.

And now he was going away, leaving their relations still vague. He might lose Nina for ever, he might never find out whether she liked him, and Nina, too, would probably never guess that he was harbouring an undeclared love.

So thinking, Nikolai walked to the clinic where Nina worked; he was still uncertain whether he would bring himself to tell her all at their farewell meeting. All he hoped for was that Nina would not be in that prickly, teasing mood that sometimes possessed her for no reason at all.

But when after a long ordeal of waiting Nikolai succeeded in getting Nina into the reception-room, she ran up to him with that very look on her face that he specially feared. She stood before him clad in a white smock with a little white cap miraculously balanced on her luxuriant hair and, hands dug into her pockets, looked at him with a cool, aloof expression.

"You look at me as if I were some malingerer who you were going to give hell to," Nikolai said in an effort to conceal how upset he felt. "But I'm really in pain, you know, you ought to be sorry for me."

"It's easy to see what's wrong with you," Nina replied mockingly, throwing him a quick searching look. "You're planning to enjoy yourself all day and evening. But I've still to finish my education. I haven't time to fool about having a good time."

"Aren't you coming to see us off?" Nikolai asked, twirling his new hat behind his back. "You can't miss that."

"I certainly can," said Nina, rocking on her high-heeled shoes. "No. I'm not coming."

"That means we shan't see each other again," muttered Nikolai. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

At that moment a tremor passed over Nina's face. Her expression changed, her eyes grew big with alarm, she took her hands out of her pockets and clutched them to her breast as if protecting herself against something.

"Tomorrow! What do you mean?" she asked him softly. "Are you going away for good?"

"Yes, for good. With Andrei. I told you about it."

"You told me it was settled in principle but. . . . Somehow I'd the idea that you would be here all summer. Does that mean we shan't be able to spend our holidays together?"

Nikolai had never seen Nina look that way before. He had never heard her speak in such tones—with so much concern and alarm and lack of reticence. There were tears in her eyes, her lips trembled, she looked as though she might start crying in front of everybody.

They stood in the middle of the reception-room. They did not hear the woman weeping on the sofa or the doctor trying to console her. They heard nothing, saw nothing. They stood face to face quite outside the world of physical pain and unconsolable grief. Their grief was far from unconsolable. If it could be called grief at all.

"I'll ask for the day off," Nina said suddenly. "All day and the evening too. Wait here, I'll come back in a few minutes."

She hurried away, leaving Nikolai alone in the reception-room. He

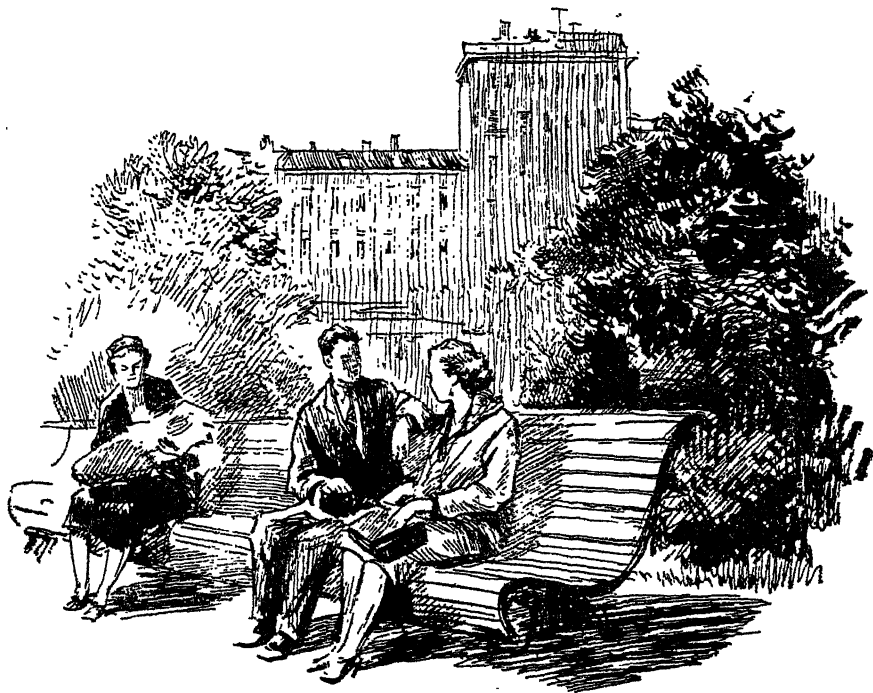
was stupefied, both happy and bewildered at once. He felt that the most significant moment in his life was at hand. If only he could summon the courage to utter those vitally important tender words that he had repeated to himself so often.

When Nina returned, she had discarded her smock and wore a light grey costume with a wisp of a voile kerchief at her throat. When they went into the street and the sun struck them from behind the leafy bough of a tree, Nikolai noticed that her uncovered hair glinted auburn. Nina walked at his side swinging a small attaché case, in which, Nikolai knew, were her smock, cap and books.

Nikolai took Nina's arm and drew her delicate little elbow to his side. It lay so obediently within his folded hand and gave him such a blessed, sweet feeling.

They walked about the streets for a long time in complete silence; it was as if everything had been said between them, as if the sense of touch had replaced all words. When they reached the boulevards, they found a bench to sit on. Nikolai did not release her even then: instead of holding her elbow he seized her small warm fingers and squeezed them.

He gazed longingly at the tiny freckles which he could just see on her olive-complexioned skin, at her rosy mouth where her white teeth glistened moistly. He longed to kiss her without any more ado, but that was out of the question because beside them on the bench sat a woman with a baby in her arms and there were people passing by all the time. And, strangely enough, he felt both vexed at the woman's presence and, at the same time, glad of the excuse she gave him. Once when dancing with Nina he had pressed his lips delicately to her warm fragrant cheek, but Nina had drawn away from him at once and said:



"What are you whispering? I didn't catch it."

She could not have thought he was whispering anything. She did not want to notice his kiss, that was all.

And now, sitting beside Nina on this bench, he went on caressing her fingers and gazing at her lips in silence. Nina too said nothing; but she did not remove her hand. On the contrary, she even gave his fingers a gentle squeeze as if she was afraid he was going to withdraw them.

"Ninotchka," Nikolai whispered feelingly. "Will you write to me?"

Nina nodded and went on squeezing his hand. Her face looked grave as she stared vacantly ahead. She expected Nikolai to say something more and this he noticed.

"I'll write to you often," Nikolai continued, bending to her shoulder. "I've bought two packets of envelopes specially for my letters to you."

"Two packets?" asked Nina and cast a strange look at Nikolai as if she were returning from a reverie that had taken her far away. "How long do you intend to go on writing to me?"

"As long as you like. Ten years," said Nikolai ardently. "If you reply, that is."

"Ten years?"

The fingers that had just been so tender and soft were suddenly withdrawn from Nikolai's hand.

"Separation is a dangerous thing," she said. "I don't know whether I'll have the patience for such a long correspondence."

"For love separation is like wind to a fire," said Nikolai in confusion. "The small ones get blown out, the big ones flame up. I didn't make that up, Ninotchka, I read it somewhere."

"In your grandmother's album, I expect," Nina snapped. "In those days all kinds of endurance tests were in fashion."

She had apparently not noticed the word "love" that had cost him so much effort to pronounce. She had not noticed it as she had not wanted to notice his kiss that time. Playing with the lock of her attaché case, she started to tell him about her own grandmother who boasted that she had withstood the endurance test not only of time but of distance.

"As a girl Granny lived in Siberia. Her betrothed was called up into the navy and sent to Sevastopol. She waited and waited for him. Not for ten years, true, but for three, and then off she went to join him. She hadn't any money so she went on foot. She walked a long, long way, for a whole year. There was a touching reunion in Sevastopol, followed by a wedding. It makes Granny cry even today when she recalls all that. . . . As for me I wouldn't have walked all the way to Sevastopol or waited so long."

Nikolai sat hunched up, hugging his knees. He was thinking that today he was not going to be able to talk to Nina about the most important thing. He had let the opportunity pass, he had ruined everything and the words which he had so often repeated in his own mind would again be left unsaid.

But Nina went on talking as if she had not noticed how Nikolai's expression had changed. She was telling him now about one of her fellow-students who planned to go to Chukotka after graduating and was talking everybody else into going there with him.

"So you've decided to go to Chukotka?" Nikolai asked with alarm.

"I haven't decided anything yet."

Her tone suggested that she expected nothing more from her talk with Nikolai.

"I'm hungry," she said. "I haven't had a bite of anything since last night. Let's go and buy something."

They got up from the bench and Nikolai trailed along obediently after her. In the shop she chose with a businesslike air a bunch of radishes, some spring onions and a few other things.

"Come and have lunch with us," she said. "You've no idea what a wonderful salad Granny will make out of all these things. You'll have a chance of talking to her about the way she stood the endurance test and how separation fans the fire of love."

"No, thanks," said Nikolai. "You might have stayed with me a bit longer."

"I'm tired of walking," Nina said firmly. "I'll come out with you this evening, if you like."

"But we've got people coming in this evening. You must come, definitely. It's our farewell party."

"I think I've got to be at the Conservatoire tonight," said Nina, wrinkling her brow. "Yes, it's today. I've a subscription ticket."

She walked on, swinging her attaché case, Nikolai was ready to burst into tears, for now he realized that there could be no question of any conclusive conversation. He tried to talk her out of going to the Conservatoire; at least she should drop in at the party late if she did not want to miss the concert.

"I'll come, maybe," Nina said in an offhand way, looking to see whether her tram was coming. "But don't wait for me. . . ."

The tram arrived; Nina jumped on to the platform. Nikolai watched her go with a crestfallen look. He saw her reach the door to enter the tram, begin to open it, then suddenly change her mind, and bumping against a man in uniform who had got on after her, lean over the side. The attaché case, from which a sprig of onion tops stuck out, dangled in her hand, the sun kindled sparks in her auburn hair, and in a flash her face again expressed concern and alarm as it had done in the reception-room. She sought Nikolai, caught sight of him among the people on the pavement, smiled and called:

"I'll come, Nikolushka. You can count on it."

Chapter Two

1

Stepan Demyanovich Stoletov arrived at Verkhnyaya Kamenka in early spring. He was sent there by the Central Committee of the Communist Party to organize political work at the factory. The Verkhnyaya Kamenka Machine Works was still very young, not altogether completed and with a rather small working staff.

"It'll be up to you to knock a collective together and bring people up to the mark," he was told. "It's a place with a future. It's got a complex programme and plenty of work ahead of it. Difficult work at that."

This warning did not frighten Stoletov but it made him feel somewhat anxious. Till then he had never undertaken political work on his

own except during the war, at the front. But the war was another matter: in peace time he had worked as a designing-engineer at a leading factory where he was a member of the Communist Party committee and was more involved in questions of technical progress than in strictly political matters.

He pointed out that he would run into difficulties as a political organizer: he had no experience, he lacked the necessary tact, he was impatient and quick-tempered and that would not do when you had a large collective to work with. He had not enough theoretical knowledge. His objections, however, were over-ruled by a single document—a reference in his record. The reference had been written by the military command, and it said that as commissar, and later as assistant-commander for political affairs, Stoletov, in addition to showing great personal bravery, had proved himself to be a splendid organizer, knew how to sustain a high morale in the division and was held in affection and respect by all its members.

"But that was at the front," said Stoletov when confronted with the document. "This is a peace-time job."

"Well, tackle the peace-time job the way you did your work at the front. As for experience, that's something that can be acquired."

With his appointment to Verkhnyaya Kamenka, Stoletov's life took a sharp turn. It meant breaking with the work he knew well and was fond of, with the factory he knew inside out, and with the town where he had lived many years. It meant parting with his family, too, for his wife Varya was unwilling to drop her work and go with her husband to a factory community where there was nothing for her to do.

Stoletov, consequently, felt disappointed and upset as, cursing the flattering words his front companions had written about him, he left for Verkhnyaya Kamenka alone. He went there with reluctance, prejudiced against the new job and against the people he would have to meet in it.

He was morose and on his guard when he went to the first meeting at which a new Communist Party bureau was to be elected. He went up on to the platform to give the meeting some details about himself—a somewhat short, thick-set man with a mass of stiff black hair, keen dark eyes and a mouth with hard lines at the corners.

"I was born in 1910," he began. "Joined the Party in '32. I have higher education and am a mechanical engineer by profession. I've never had any Party reprimands."

Pausing a moment, as if considering what was important in his life story, he added:

"During the war I did political work in the army."

That was all. He remained on the platform waiting for questions. He looked calm but, in fact, he felt ill at ease as he stared hard at the roomful of unknown faces below him. He saw them only vaguely: his excitement blurred his vision—that and the idea that all those people sitting before him were staring back and weighing him up themselves.

"Has anybody any questions to ask?" the chairman said.

Several hands shot up; someone, without asking to be given the floor, called:

"He ought to tell us more about himself. Who are his parents? Where do they live? What do they do?"

"Before the Revolution my father worked in Zorin's gold-fields," said Stoletov, looking towards the corner from where the questions had come. "Now he is a collective farmer, a stable-man. My mother is also a member of the kolkhoz—she runs the dairy farm."

He said no more, feeling that he had exhausted the subject. But from the front row a bespectacled man who had all the time been scribbling in a notebook raised his hand.

"Yes, Comrade Chumov," the chairman said grudgingly. "You have the floor."

Chumov rose and walked slowly to the platform. He was a small man, stout and short-legged. Climbing on to the platform and standing beside Stoletov, he laid down his notebook, cleared his throat and said:

"I find Comrade Stoletov's answers unsatisfactory. I would like to hear some more details about his life. Let him tell us about it from the first year he started to work. I want to hear about himself, about his closest relatives, about his hesitations, his deviations from the general line of the Party—if there were any, of course," he added.

Ah, thought Stoletov, here it comes, for he sensed a note of unfriendly suspicion in the speaker's voice. So this was the way the new collective was greeting him.

"But the secretary of the regional committee has reported to us on Comrade Stoletov's working life, hasn't he?" said the chairman, wincing as if he had toothache. "And his references have been read. What's the point of repeating them and wasting the time of the meeting?"

"There's no hurry," replied Chumov, adjusting his spectacles with a dignified air. "The collective has the right to know everything there is to know about a comrade who is being put up for responsible political work."

There was nothing objectionable in what Chumov said except the way he said it. With a shrug the chairman told Stoletov to reply, but briefly.

"I'll be brief," replied Stoletov, his eyes following Chumov who was leaving the platform. "I'll try not to keep you long. . . . My working life began in nineteen twenty-five. I was fifteen then," he said, advancing to the very edge of the platform. "That was at Sharya, on the Northern railway. I started work as a fitter in the locomotive sheds. I wasn't a fitter at the very beginning, of course. I did all kinds of odd jobs: washed the locomotives, kept the lines clean and did everything I was told to. I'd been to village school for four years before that. . . ."

For a moment he wondered whether to tell them that he had gone to Sharya because his uncle lived there—his father's elder brother. His uncle worked on the railway; he was a conductor on long-distance trains and was considered to be "a man of means." Stoletov's father hoped that young Stepan would learn the ropes from his uncle. There was nothing to be learned at home: the gold-field had closed, the family barely eked out an existence. "We're done for," Stepan's mother said. "Let him join his uncle. He's well-off; looking after our Stepan won't ruin him."

It didn't. Uncle sent him straight into the locomotive sheds and at top speed out of his own home: you be off to the hostel, my pet, we don't need your company to keep us warm.

"I found myself straight away in a large workers' collective," Stoletov continued, not mentioning his uncle or how hurt he had felt at his behaviour. "Actually, it was not so very large but you must take into

account that I had gone there from the wilds, from what used to be a gold-field, and that our village used to be called Tyomnaya.¹"

"Tyomnaya," somebody interjected in a joyful bass. "Why, I'm from near there myself."

A tall stout man in a homespun blouse smiled at Stoletov from the second row. He did not rise to his feet or ask for the floor; he might have been not at a meeting but at a table in the company of friends.

"Tyomnaya," he said. "Now it's been renamed Svetlaya.² That was after the district got electricity. It was a poor, ramshackle village no better than ours. Ours was called Nepryakhino³ because most of the women there worked in the gold-field and couldn't spin or weave or work on the land."

He guffawed and was going to say something else but the chairman tapped the water-jug angrily with his pencil. The stout man fell silent; but his words had established a link between Stoletov and the hall: why, a new man had come and found someone from his own district among those present!

Stoletov sensed this link and with greater freedom continued to tell how at first he had worked for over a year as a building worker—a new water-tower was being built at the railway station at that time—how he had dug earth and carried bricks and then got a job at a bench and learned a real trade.

"When I was seventeen I joined the Comsomol," he went on. "And I ought to say that everything I have now, education, an engineer's diploma, the high title of Party member and much else, too, I owe to the Lenin Comsomol."

A pretty young woman who sat next to the stout man in the homespun blouse looked at her neighbour proudly. Did you hear that? her eyes asked. The way the new Party organizer praised the Comsomol? Not everybody in this room understands the strength of the Comsomol. Just you try now to wave aside the Comsomol members and their requests as has happened sometimes in the past. Oh yes, the new Party organizer is definitely the right sort.

"Putting on airs, eh?" her neighbour whispered in her ear. "Better not, Lyuba dear; the Comsomol was probably better run at that place than it is here."

The girl made a gesture of impatience: Stoletov was describing how he had longed to study, how he had dreamed of becoming an engineer, and how those dreams seemed likely to remain unfulfilled.

"There was I, a half-literate lad, daring to aim at higher education. What was I to do? Go back to school. Not I. I'd grown up, I wasn't going to sit with the little fellows behind a desk again. I decided to learn on my own. But that's not an easy matter, you know, and I don't suppose anything would have come of it if the secretary of our Comsomol organization had not taken an interest in me. . . ."

The Comsomol, his youth, the years of study, of work, of war. . . . Could one really describe all that and was there any need to do it? Stoletov

¹ From tyomny—dark, obscure.

² From svetly—light.

³ From nepryakha—non-spinner

spoke tersely; he was calm and collected in his manner; but he felt relieved when he concluded.

"That's all there is to say about my working life."

The room was quiet. The chairman was on his feet, about to tell Stoletov to step down, but Chumov raised his hand. There was a worried frown on his face.

"I have a question to ask," he said. "Will Comrade Stoletov please tell us who of his relatives have been deprived of their civic rights."

"None of them," replied Stoletov.

"One more question," said Chumov promptly. "Comrade Stoletov still hasn't told us anything about any of his hesitations and deviations from the general line of the Party. I asked him to do that before."

"And I've got nothing to say on the subject," said Stoletov angrily. "I've never had any hesitations; I've never deviated from the Party line."

"Then let me ask this," shouted Chumov, but the hubbub and cries that came from all sides drowned his voice.

"Shut him up."

"That's enough of Chumov."

"Get on with the business, Chairman."

The chairman tapped his pencil against the water-jug and beckoned Stoletov to the chair beside him. But Stoletov left the platform and sat in the front row. He knew that there would be no more questions now. The meeting went on to discuss the candidates for election to the bureau. Stoletov listened while people spoke about him and the other candidates; he sensed the way hands were raised behind him when the chairman asked whether Stoletov's name was to be left on the list of candidates. After that there was an interval. The tellers sealed the voting urn. In an adjacent room typewriters rattled: lists were being drawn up for the secret ballot. Stoletov followed everybody into the broad corridor which was already hazy with cigarette smoke, and stood a little apart from the rest, watching people pass to and fro.

The passers-by looked at him curiously and walked on, chatting among themselves. It was not easy to meet their eyes but Stoletov did not look away or try to avoid their glances. He stood, leaning against the window jamb, smoking and looking hard into the faces of the Communists as they passed him. He felt himself to be in the grip of strong emotions, he longed to see but one familiar face; but his manner betrayed none of this.

At length there came to him a tall grey-haired man in a jacket of naval cut. He extended a hand.

"Don't you recognize me? We've met before. My name is Kovalev."

There was something familiar in the man's voice and looks, but Stoletov could not place him. He returned the firm handclasp and looked at the dark-complexioned face with its early sun tan, and tried hard to recall something connected with the name, with that thick, rather testy voice, with the broad forehead and the deep furrows that bit into it vertically.

"Don't you remember?" said Kovalev. "We met at a technical conference three years ago. I spoke about a design for a new machine. Have you forgotten that argument about the mechanical 'sand shrew'?"

The "sand shrew!" Stoletov at once recalled the big sheet of cartridge paper with a drawing of a machine unlike any he had ever seen before. The design was original and on quite new lines. The machine

could be adapted to do various jobs—dig out earth, unload sand or coal from barges and replace cranes in certain building jobs.

"I remember very well now," said Stoletov looking at the unexpected acquaintance. "But, if you don't mind my saying so, Comrade Kovalev, you've changed a lot since then."

That time, too, Kovalev had worn that jacket, rather like naval uniform, and his voice had the same impatient, compelling ring in it, but there were not those furrows in his broad forehead and his face had not worn that heavy, closed-up expression. Things must have been rough for the fellow, thought Stoletov. No wonder he hadn't recognized him. . . .

But he kept quiet about that and spoke about the machine.

"The idea was interesting," he said, recalling the argument that broke out after Kovalev's report. "Did you manage to break down the opposition? There was plenty of it, if I remember well."

"Yes, there was and there still is. I've no victory to boast of; I've given up the fight. Surrendered and pulled into a quiet harbour."

Kovalev spoke rather defiantly and at once fell silent as if putting a full-stop to the conversation on that subject. Tall, broad-shouldered, he stood beside Stoletov and unsmilingly returned the greetings of the passers-by. Stoletov watched him out of the corner of his eye and for some reason felt glad that he had met this man.

"Hello, Arseni Mikhailovich, so you know the new Party organizer?" the stout man in the blouse who had spoken at the meeting about the village of Nepryakhino called across the passage. "Let me introduce myself, Syurtukov. Ivan Trefilyevich. I'm a fitter. I work with him," he added, nodding at Kovalev.

The new-comer looked merrily at the two men; then his small mischievous eyes sought out someone among the passers-by. He grasped a thin man by the sleeve.

"This is secretary of the Party group in the foundry," he said by way of introduction. "Vsevolod Nikitich Lepikhin."

Syurtukov seemed to take pleasure in introducing his comrades, for he stopped everybody who happened to come near their group. Stoletov was soon surrounded by people who shook hands with him and told him who they were, while Syurtukov kept his eye on those who hung back and shoved them to the fore.

"Come here, Lyuba," he called to the girl who had been sitting next to him at the meeting. "Come on. Don't be shy."

But the girl did not move. Syurtukov explained that she was the Comsomol secretary and a fine, energetic girl. What was more, considering that practically all the workers at the factory were young, she thought she was the real chief of the place.

Stoletov was not left alone again the whole evening. All the time he was surrounded by people, answering their questions or listening to what they had to say about themselves, the factory or the new housing estate. And when everybody poured into the street after the meeting, several people accompanied him back to the factory hotel; Syurtukov even invited him home, and when Stoletov pleaded that he was tired, came up to his room with him instead.

"You should have come to my place," he said, glancing round the room.

"You won't get anything to eat or drink here. We could have had supper together. Perhaps you'll change your mind?"...

Stoletov, however, wanted to be on his own.

"Thank you, Ivan Trefilyevich." He wished him good night. "Any other time I'll come with pleasure."

Syurtukov left. Switching off the light, Stoletov lay on the bed. He lay in the dark with eyes wide open, trying to think of his programme for the following day. But other things came into his mind: the few words with which the secretary of the regional committee of the Communist Party had recommended him to the meeting; then, his talk with Kovalev; then, swiftly replacing each other as they loomed up in the darkness, the faces of the Communists, together with snatches of their conversation.

He remembered the work he had left behind at the previous factory—the design of a big mechanical shovel on which he had been working with a large group of designers. He remembered his home, his wife Varya, his sons Ivan and Demyan, various half-finished jobs, the books he had not read to the end. With a sigh he rose from the bed where he had lain sleepless for over an hour, and went to the window.

The window overlooked a square beyond which he could see the dark shape of the factory buildings. The windows of some of the buildings blazed with light: that was where the night shift was working. Other windows were dark. Over the glass roof of the foundry shop a rosy glow lit the sky. The factory was strange to him, a place he had yet to explore. In it worked men and women whom Stoletov did not know, people with whom he had to live and work.

2

A few days after the meeting Stoletov wrote a long letter to his wife.

"I must confess, Varya dear," he wrote, "that I have a strong yearning to be back at the old job. Please call at the designing office and find out how things are going on the project. Have they solved the problem of enlarging the scoop and lengthening the arm? Tell them that I have been thinking about it here and I think I've hit on something interesting. . . ."

Putting the letter aside, he opened a drawer in the table and took out a sheet of paper covered with figures and formulae. At the side was a drawing of the arm of a mechanical shovel—well-proportioned, light, it carried effortlessly a heavy, closed scoop.

Stoletov sighed, glanced through the calculations again and turned back to his letter.

"I am enclosing a sketch of my idea. Let the comrades have it and ask them to write to me if it is suitable. Maybe they've discovered something better. Yesterday, when I was at a meeting of Party activists, I thought about the shovel's arm and this idea came into my mind. I think it's the right one."

He smiled to himself as he recalled how at that meeting the chairman kept glancing at him, thinking, probably, that the new Party organizer was roughing out the text of his speech. Then the chairman's eyes fell on Stoletov's notebook and he gaped with surprise at the figures and the sketch.

"You are in my thoughts every day," wrote Stoletov. "Little boys, too, and all the family. How are you getting on? Not forgotten me? Really, it was wrong of you to send me off here on my own. I'm living like a hermit-crab—I've no friends—nobody looks after me—there's nobody to

clean the spots on my jacket or iron my shirts—I'm all fluffy and hairy. Plenty of work. More than I can easily manage. . . ."

Stoletov threw himself into his work with zest: much of his time he spent in the shops getting to know people and looking for helpers and friends among them. He had been used to working in a large collective and was worried not to find more Communists—only some two hundred in all. He soon knew them all by name, for he found their names everywhere—in the lists of activists, on the factory trade-union committee, on various commissions and bureaus. Wherever public-spirited men and women were needed he found the names of the Communists. As a result, instead of each Communist having a single responsibility to occupy him, he was burdened with a whole string of most varied tasks. Why the devil weren't they doing better in drawing non-Party people into the work, Stoletov asked himself as he examined for the nth time the list of Communists engaged in social activities. It was wrong to have everything hanging on a single peg. No, this wasn't the way to work.

During his visits to the shops he found himself comparing Verkhnyaya Kamenka unfavourably with the factory he used to work at. The old factory was like a house which has been lived in for many years and contains all kinds of useful things that have accumulated over a long period of time, things acquired gradually as the result of years of experience. Here, though, everything was half-baked, unfinished; shortages kept cropping up, unforeseen things happened. The factory had to get itself organized and at the same time to fulfil its production programme—and it often seemed to Stoletov that the combined task was beyond its powers.

Stoletov mentioned his misgivings to nobody except his wife to whom he wrote long, detailed letters. He confided in Varya all his interests, thoughts and moods. He hid nothing from her. That had long been their way. Neither of them could conceive of any other relationship.

But it was one thing to come back from work and tell Varya in person all his worries of that day, and quite another to write to her about them and then wait for her reply. Often it happened that while his letter was on the way and before he had received Varya's reply, events had taken quite another turn and Varya's advice came too late to be of any use.

So it was with the letter he sent soon after his arrival. He had written to Varya about the arm for the mechanical shovel, only to realize a few days later that he had made an error in his calculations; he then decided to make a radical change in the design. But Varya had already passed on the first, the wrong design, to the factory and written to say how grateful Stoletov's comrades were for his help. There was nothing else to do but send a telegram: "Cancel arm sending new design shortly."

Besides, in her replies to his letters, Varya expressed regret that she could not share the hardships of her poor husband's unorganized life, and reproached him for not making new friends and settling down.

"It's all sheer pig-headedness on your part," she wrote. "You should have refused to go there from the start, but once there you ought to settle down and not live like a hermit-crab. Make some friends. Go to people's houses and invite them out yourself. You are not a one to live without friends; I know that. Until you find some you'll go on writing me those sour letters. Living on your own isn't your nature."

These edifying words reached Stoletov too late: before Varya's letter

came, Stoletov had met some people and certainly could not complain of loneliness.

The first to call on the new Party organizer was the editor of the works' newspaper. This turned out to be the bespectacled Chumov who had plagued Stoletov with his questions at the meeting and made so many hurried notes in his pad. This time, too, he had his notebook in hand; from it protruded book-marks and ragged-edged sheets of paper which looked as if they had been folded and unfolded many times.

"May I come in?" the visitor asked, shutting the door carefully behind him and introducing himself.

In the light of day Chumov looked sleeker than ever. His soft hands felt quite boneless; sharp eyes looked from behind his spectacles. His smile revealed large yellowish teeth.

"I have called so that we can get to know each other and to complete the material I gathered at the meeting," said Chumov as he lowered himself into a chair. "We are going to print a detailed profile of you, together with your photograph. Incidentally, could you let me have a photograph?"

"No," said Stoletov. "And you shouldn't print anything personal about me."

Opening his notebook, Chumov examined its contents thoughtfully. He gave no indication of having heard Stoletov's remark.

"There are a few things here that are not clear," he said, looking up at length. "You said that when you arrived at Sharya you lived with your uncle. Later you moved from your uncle's to a hostel. You ought to make clear who your uncle was and why you left him. And another thing: what honours did you obtain at college, or did you graduate without honours?"

"My reason for leaving my uncle's was purely personal," replied Stoletov. "He was a railway conductor, a fact that is not of the slightest importance in my life. I graduated without honours. I'm telling you this to satisfy your personal curiosity. I repeat: you must not print my photograph or anything about me in the paper."

"My personal curiosity is inspired by the interests of society. Our factory collective ought to know something about the man who is henceforth to be in charge of political work."

"They'll get to know him, all right," said Stoletov. "People should be judged by their work and not according to who their uncles were."

Chumov's manner changed. Snapping his notebook to, he said:

"Your instructions will be heeded. We shall not print either your photograph or any details about your life. We shall keep to a bare announcement. . . . And now I should like to speak to you about something else, about this material I have here."

Chumov drew from his notebook a file of sheets held together by a paper-clip. He smoothed out the creases with his soft plump hand. The material could not have been new—the sheets of paper were ragged at the edges and folded almost to shreds.

"I am really glad, Stepan Demyanovich, that a real Communist has come to the factory," Chumov began, covering his papers with the notebook. "I am sure that you will introduce order and restrain various people who have got out of hand. I have long been looking for the truth, Stepan Demyanovich, and, unfortunately, I have far from always found it. . . ."

He sighed and went on to tell how difficult a time he had had in his campaign for truth and justice, and how he had been exposed to slander and persecution, but had not given up and did not intend to. There was a note of self-pity in his voice, yet when someone looked in through the door he snapped at him: "Wait outside. We're busy."

Really, Stoletov reflected, the man behaved as if he were in his own office. He might at least not play the boss here and give orders. And now he was talking in quite a different tone, buzzing like a fly, so monotonous, gabbling on as if he were afraid he would not be allowed to finish what he had to say. With reason, perhaps, because he was an utter bore. Difficult to understand what he was saying, he was so shifty with those puzzling hints and undertones. . . .

It grew dark outside. The sky clouded over and slanting rain began to beat against the window. How cheerless a young thin tree looked with its unopened leaves, how it rocked in the wind and bent to the ground as if it were going to snap. Two women dashed across the square towards the factory—the rain had caught them on the road where there was no shelter, the square was large and open, they had to run with bent heads. . . . And what was that sudden loud noise? Water was gushing from a drain-pipe which, for some reason, lacked its last section so that the water poured off the roof right between the windows of his office.

"I have everything set out in the form of a report with all supporting documentation," said Chumov in a business-like manner. "Some things, naturally, cannot be documented but in those cases the notes list witness and evidence."

He pushed his report over to Stoletov. Stoletov removed the paper-clip and spread the pages in front of him. There were many of them, typed in blurred, lilac ink. The carbon must have been worn out; or, perhaps, this was the last, faint copy of several made at once.

Stoletov examined the document with distaste. He could see at once that this was a carefully compiled denunciation, consisting of scraps of knowledge that defamed many people on matters both old and quite up-to-date.

He reluctantly registered a number of facts—goings-on in the girls' hostel where the inmates received their boy friends under the guise of husbands; a woman compositor called Polina who had been discharged from the print-shop for impertinence and indiscipline and had been appointed warden at Number Five Hostel—what had she to teach young people? To be rude and disobedient to their chiefs? The factory manager was tyrannical and obstinate; he did not heed public opinion, had wangled a three-room flat for himself and his wife; Kovalev, a Communist and manager of the machine shop, had divorced his wife and abandoned his school-girl daughter; Yelena Vlashevna Protasova, a turner, a member of the factory trade-union committee, was overfond of drink and held drinking parties in her house (that had started as long ago as during the war); Zvonaryeva, the secretary of the Comsomol committee, took no notice of the press, did not reply to remarks by Comsomol members published in the newspaper, and bought herself a car on means that came from no one knew where; the father of Nazarenko, a Comsomol member, had, according to everything that could be ascertained, been a condemned kulak, a fact that Nazarenko had never revealed. . . . Names and dates jumped before Stoletov's eyes.

Chumov waited patiently for Stoletov to finish reading his report. He watched him carefully; twice he wiped his glasses. Read on, read on, learn what a cesspool you've fallen into. Get to know the people around you in this factory. How much effort and time had he, Chumov, spent in struggle against these people, how many statements had he made about each one of them.

"Yes, it's a murky picture," Stoletov said when he had finished. "I'll take it all up, Comrade Chumov. I'll speak to the other members of the bureau about it."

It was unpleasant to start his work at a new place with a collection of statements like this. But the report existed; there it lay on his desk and there was no getting away from it. He would willingly have put it away in the farthest corner of the drawer in his desk but personnel questions were his prime concern and the statements dealt with those very people with whom he had to work.

"I should not recommend you to bring my report to the knowledge of the bureau," warned Chumov. "Among the members of the bureau are some who defend the unworthy elements I have written about. I suggest that my report be classified as secret. . . ."



"I cannot have any secrets from other members of the bureau," replied Stoletov drily. "I am not prepared to make a secret of your report."

He said this in the hope that Chumov would, perhaps, ask for his papers back. That, it seemed, was Chumov's intention, for he extended his hand uncertainly, gathered the papers together and replaced the clip, but after a moment's reflection, handed the report back to Stoletov.

"I hope, Stepan Demyanovich, that I shall not have to suffer for my revelations. I am acting in the interests of the state. I am not concerned with my personal advantages."

His small plump figure slipped out of the room as silently as a mouse. What was that trailing behind him on the floor, like a tail? Ah, it was the strap of a letter-case which he had worn over his shoulder but was now clasped to his side under his arm.

So that was the editor, thought Stoletov as he took a file of newspapers from a table. Well, he would have a look at the fellow's handiwork.

But before he sat down to examine the factory newspaper he went to the window and opened it; the office felt stuffy. . . .

3

Yelena Vlashevna Protasova who worked as a turner in the machine shop came to the offices of the Communist Party committee with a complaint: she wanted a special tool locker made for her; the foreman had promised to get it done but had done nothing about it. She had reminded him about it several times and in the end he had flared up and told her that he had more important things to worry about than her locker and that it could wait.

"Wait?" she complained to Stoletov. "There's a lot depends on that locker: if I had everything handy I could work ever so much faster. Why, that's something any housewife would understand. Once you let your pots and pans stray from you, you'll be running all over the house looking for them and it'll be nightfall before you have dinner dished up."

Yelena Protasova sat opposite Stoletov and spoke with such conviction that he at once believed in her locker and in its importance to her. He enquired precisely what sort of a locker she had in mind and Yelena told him: the top was to slant like a school-desk, the door was to be in one piece and inside there were to be five shelves for various cutting-tools, for a measuring instrument and for lubricating materials and cleaning rags.

"Why, I gave him a sketch of it with all the dimensions; it wouldn't have cost much, but all the same they didn't do anything about it. Look, I'll draw it for you myself."

She looked round for a sheet of paper, thriftily took the smallest one from a pile on the desk and, choosing a sharp pencil, assiduously drew a locker not unlike those that are to be seen beside hospital beds.

"Can you make it out?" she asked doubtfully. "I'm not much of a hand at drawing."

"I get the idea," said Stoletov as he examined the drawing. "Quite an interesting little cupboard. Your own idea?"

"Mine? Of course not," laughed Yelena. "I took a book out of the library, about advanced methods in turning, and it was there I noticed this locker. It says in the book that by putting lockers like that in the factory they cut down the time spent in getting the machine ready by a half—from twenty-seven minutes to fifteen. They wouldn't make a thing like that up. Now we sometimes spend as much as forty-seven minutes in making ready and all because of the bad arrangement of working space."

Yelena Protasova's voice was soft. She spoke quietly, a little timidly even, as if it embarrassed her to take up Stoletov's time with her private

business. Yet her manner conveyed the feeling that until that business was settled she would give herself or anybody else no rest.

Stoletov liked her from first sight. He liked her firm assurance in the rightness of her case, the thrifty concern that the working space should be arranged conveniently. He liked her appearance—full-faced with slightly prominent cheek-bones, her broad brow lightly wrinkled, her hair touched with grey and divided by a parting as straight as a die.

He made up his mind to see that Yelena Protasova certainly got her locker and promised to speak to the head of the department about the matter.

"That's good," Yelena said, rising to her feet. "Thank you. Now I shall feel sure of getting it."

Stoletov telephoned to Kovalev as soon as the woman had left his office. He did not have to explain the details of the locker: Kovalev told him that the sketch lay on his desk and promised to order it that very day. The shop manager spoke of Protasova in friendly tones, a fact that Stoletov noted with pleasure.

A few days later Yelena Protasova came to the Party committee office again and announced with satisfaction that the locker was ready and now stood near her lathe.

"You ought to see that the other turners get them too, Stepan Demyanovich," she said in her quiet calm voice. "I'm saving at least twenty minutes a shift now. How much would it come to if everybody saved as much? I calculate that three people can save an hour between them. And if every turner in the factory were saving that much? How many turners are there in all?"

Stoletov did not know and Yelena looked at him reproachfully. He promised that he would bring the locker question up before the office for the organization of labour; Yelena wrote in her little book the name of one of the workers in that office so that she should know who to keep on to about the matter.

Business over, Yelena was for a moment at a loss for words but quickly overcame her shyness and asked resolutely: "I've heard you're living in the hotel. Do you mean to say they haven't found you a flat yet?"

"I don't need one," Stoletov replied. "I came here on my own. A room's all I need."

"On your own? But I heard you were a married man with two sons."

"So they even know about my sons, do they?" said Stoletov with a laugh. "How did they find out about them?"

"Oh, we know everything about everybody here," replied Yelena calmly. "People are interested to know why your wife didn't come along with you."

Stoletov did not reply at first. The woman's lack of ceremony upset him and he felt like telling her to mind her own business. But he did not tell her that: the question had been asked in a friendly, kind voice and he realized that what had prompted it was not tactlessness or curiosity but genuine sympathy and a wish to help another to arrange his life.

"My wife has a job which she can't drop," he replied. "When she gets her holidays she'll join me here."

"To live alone is the last thing anybody wants to do," sighed Yelena. "By the way, have you had your dinner, Stepan Demyanovich?" she asked with concern. "Come and eat with me. I'll cook you something."

It's not good to go to bed on an empty stomach. The canteen's been long shut and there's no sense in your going to the Green Mountain Restaurant."

She rose, confident in Stoletov's acceptance; and he, involuntarily submitting to the will of this likeable woman, stood up and reached for his hat.

They went out of doors. A cool spring breeze blew in their faces. The breeze brought the scent of melting snow and damp earth, of the pine woods and the lake that had only just been freed of ice. The pine woods were out of sight but the sigh of the wind could be heard among the trees; far below, the waters of the lake splashed and slapped against the banks; and all these scents and sounds were accentuated because close by a five-storey white apartment house stood with its windows aglow with light, a chain of street lights ran from the house to the factory, and over the glass roofs of the factory's shops hung a pale aura of electric light.

"You get a strange mixture here," said Stoletov. "Something completely urban and next to it Nature in all her primitive beauty. It's unusual, but it's lovely. It's a pity, though, that Nature's had to retreat."

"Nature has retreated just as far as she was ordered to," said Yelena. "She won't have to go any further—that's not allowed for in the plan."

She pointed somewhere in the darkness and said that quite recently all this neighbourhood was covered with forest.

"Do you find that hard to believe? Well, ten or twelve years ago you could meet bears where we're walking now. I've seen them myself and my late husband shot two of them. He, like me, was born here, we lived in the old village where the forest came right up to the edge of the place."

She walked sure-footedly over the uneven ground—the road was not asphalted here. They had passed the last street lamp and ahead of them shone only a few, widely-separated lights. That was the old village built many years ago near a small metal works. The works had been destroyed by Kolchak's bands during the Civil War, the blast-furnaces blown up and the rolling-mill equipment pillaged.

"Then afterwards, during the reconstruction, the factory wasn't included in the plan," said Yelena. "There would have been no sense in rebuilding it: why, the way we see things now that little place wouldn't be called a works. And old it was too, built a long, long time ago. There was nothing of it left but ruins—a pile of bricks and stones. That and our village."

They walked up to the gate of a low-roofed cottage with three windows in the front; Yelena rattled the latch and flung the wicket gate open. A big white dog ran up whimpering, and leaped around her wagging its tail.

"Feeling lonely, Sharik? Poor old thing, being on your own all day. Come on, I'll let you in now."

Yelena opened the front door and switched on lights over the porch, in the passage where a tub of water stood, and in the kitchen which had a large whitewashed stove.

"Come in, Stepan Demyanovich," she said invitingly. "Make yourself comfortable while I get supper ready."

She drew the window curtains, switched on the light in the two small

living-rooms, tidied something on the bed as she passed it, popped something else into a cupboard and took something into the kitchen. The dog hung on her heels, wagging its bushy tail. She went to the shelf and took down a pan.

"My neighbours laugh at me and say I'd do better to raise a pig," said Yelena as she fed the dog. "But I'm fond of the brute. I've got used to him. My husband brought him home as a pup with the idea of training him to the gun but never got round to it. . . . My girls were small then and used to play with him; he went along with them to the school gate. He'd wait there till they came out again. In those days the school was a long way off and without him the girls would have been afraid to walk there."

She told Stoletov about her daughters and her husband, all the time on the go about the room as she spread a clean cloth and laid the table. All her movements were nimble and somehow happy; she had but to touch something for it to become important and attractive: the embroidered table-cloth burst into a bright coloured pattern, every berry glowed ruddy in the jam pot. Yelena Protasova rose still higher in Stoletov's estimation; he felt very glad that he had come to this cosy bright home instead of returning to his empty cheerless room.

The supper appeared on the table as swiftly as if it had been standing somewhere ready to be brought in. Pickled cucumbers, sauerkraut, cold meat cut in large generous slices—the sight of it made Stoletov recall that he had not supped and was really hungry. Stealing a sideways glance at her visitor, Yelena took a decanter of vodka and two silver drinking cups out of the cupboard.

"Have one?" she asked.

Stoletov raised his glass to drink to his hostess' health.

She clinked glasses with him and tossed off the vodka easily, like a man, without making a wry face or choking over it.

"Before the war I never touched a drop," she said serving Stoletov with sauerkraut. "A little wine in company, maybe, but not vodka. During the war, though, when I was left on my own, I stopped being squeamish about vodka. Those were hard times, specially the first winter. The girls were small and didn't understand anything and not a letter did I get from my husband from the time he left for the front. I found out why later on: he was killed in his first engagement. I didn't know that then and I went on waiting and waiting for a letter from him that never came so that I was fair eaten up with worry. Times there were when I'd take both girls into my bed and lie there in the darkness and bit my teeth into the pillow for the loneliness. It'd be pitch black outside, for we didn't have electricity then; and what with Sharik howling in the yard and the wind wailing, my thoughts would get gloomier and gloomier. . . . I'd wait till the little girls had gone off to sleep; then I'd get up quietly and go over to my neighbour whose husband was at the front like mine. I'd go and get her out of bed and we'd have a drink together and sit and cry till our hearts felt eased."

She poured Stoletov another noggin, drained her own and asked him where he was in the war. She spoke kindly as if to one of her own family and drew from him memories of days at the front that were bitter and others that were joyful, and of his comrades in arms. He proposed that they drink to the health of those who came back and to the memory of those who did not.

"We remember them," said Yelena. "Nor is my husband forgotten. His name was Stepan, too, like yours."

She raised her glass, drank and with the back of her hand dashed away tears that she made no effort to conceal. Stoletov looked at that face that had lost its youth, wanted to say something consoling but kept his tongue; for he knew that nothing he said could console her sorrow.

Yelena Protasova sat with her chin cupped in her hand. The room was silent except for an occasional whimper from the sleeping dog and the ticking of the kitchen clock. What was in the widow's mind? What memories haunted her? Were they of that dreadful night after she heard the news of her husband's death? Or of his love that she was never to know again? Or of her daughters who had left her roof to live far away?

"It's hard enough to be left a widow when you are young but it's twice as hard when you're getting on," said Yelena, raising her tearful eyes to Stoletov. "A young woman grieves and weeps but she can still find happiness in life. But to be widowed when you're middle-aged means saying good-bye to happiness for ever. There's nobody to care for you, nobody except your children. And children's love isn't lasting, it only lasts till they give their hearts away to someone else."

She smiled wanly and pushed the dish of cold meat nearer to Stoletov.

"Help yourself, Stepan Demyanovich; you're not eating anything. You must be thinking I asked you in to make you listen to funeral orations. But it was you who brought me to it."

Rising from the table, she brought the kettle which had come to the boil, took out of the oven a puffy cake that she had put there to warm up and brewed some strong tea. And as if putting a period to the sad talk, she started telling Stoletov about the village Soviet and the factory shops and how her mates worked in her team.

"You know, it comforts me to work in the factory," she said. "It's a good place, and the young folk there work well, though little is done to teach them. That's wrong, of course. People come straight from school and start their own lives without knowing how to do it. Of course the Comsomol puts them on the right lines but that's made up of young people too; the older people just don't care."

She spoke softly and calmly, as she had done in Stoletov's office when she was talking about the locker, but in her manner there was something that showed she was firmly convinced that she was right. She was expressing ideas that had been thought over and put to the test; she did not speak lightly; she expected Stoletov to pay some attention to those ideas.

When Stoletov rose to leave, Yelena slipped a shawl over her shoulders and accompanied him to the front gate. The dog, stretching lazily, trotted after them, ran into the street and barked at the darkness.

"Do you think you'll find your way?" asked Yelena. "Just keep straight on till the road begins to climb the hill. Then you'll see the factory."

She called the dog and closed the gate behind her; Stoletov found himself alone in the dark, empty street. He walked along the uneven path past low timber cottages with their windows tightly shuttered. There was not a light to be seen in them, not a human voice to be heard. It was as if the inhabitants of this village had abandoned it for some more populous, brighter place.

The sky was dark too; only at the end of the road where the ridge of the hill was vaguely outlined did it grow somewhat lighter. Beyond that

ridge lay the factory and the new houses and lamp-lit streets. Stoletov had never seen lamps like those before: from each silvered standard they hung in clusters of five milk-white globes. On the square in front of the factory and on the main street with its several tall blocks of flats the street-lamps burned abundantly.

Despite the late hour, there were many people in the main street. A film show had just finished and the public was streaming out of the doors of the club-house; in the street a loud-speaker was emitting gay music and three cyclists were speeding round the paths in the public gardens.

Remembering that a letter to Varya lay in his pocket, Stoletov dropped it in a post-box and was about to make his way back to the hotel when he heard his name called. He looked round and saw the factory manager hurrying towards him across the street, followed by a short woman who had some difficulty in keeping up with her companion.

"Where on earth have you been, Stepan Demyanovich? We called to take you to the cinema. This is my wife, Anna Ivanovna. Come back and have supper with us."

"I've had supper, thanks," said Stoletov. "I was invited to the old village. I just managed to find my way back. What's the reason for the contrast? Here you'd think you were on Gorky Street in Moscow but it's pitch dark there. Surely they could have some street-lighting down there?"

"What, in the old village? No sense in that," the factory manager said confidently. "They've lived there without street-lighting for a thousand years and they'll manage without it now. I don't intend to spend any of the factory funds on these small craftsmen and vegetable-growers. Let the village Soviet look after it."

There was unconcealed irritation in the manager's voice, a tone that displeased Stoletov.

"I don't know what small craftsmen and vegetable-growers live there," he said, "but I've just spent the evening with a fine person, a factory worker. And I don't see why she should have to risk breaking her leg on roads like that."

"We are rehousing those who are employed at the factory. You were probably at the Syurtukovs or at old Poteryayev's place, I suppose. Give us time and we shall house them in such flats as have never been seen even in the regional centre—plenty of light, high ceilings, electric cookers, bath-rooms, open fire-places. And we shall build those houses in the pine woods overlooking the lake, not on the bare mountainside like the old village."

The factory manager spoke in a loud voice; passers-by slowed down to listen to him while his little wife looked at him with alarm. Afanasi Ivanovich Budanov was exceptionally tall. Thin and angular, he towered above everybody in any company he happened to be. His head was small and almost hairless, which gave him a bird-like appearance that was added to by his round yellowish eyes and a sharp, slightly curved beak of a nose.

A hawk, thought Stoletov. All the attributes of a hawk. While his wife was a little hen. She seemed to be afraid of him, afraid he might peck her to death any moment.

They left the pavement and crossed the square in front of the factory. The cyclists were still at it, circling the gardens quite noiselessly, each rider bent low over the handle bars. Their legs moved at an incredible speed; no one wanted to slack off and they kept up with each other, three abreast.

"They're training for the regional competition," said Budanov, nodding in their direction. "They've promised to win. We won the swimming but we lost at football and skiing. Not much to boast about in other events, either. We keep a special coach on the staff but what he does the devil only knows."

Budanov walked on waving his arms and taking long strides, quite heedless of the fact that he was leaving his wife behind. She was obviously tired but afraid to say so; it was Stoletov who suggested they should sit down on a bench he noticed in the gardens.

"All right, let's sit down if you've decided not to come home with us," agreed Budanov. "You were saying that it's like Gorky Street here. I'd like to have three rows of lamp standards in this square so that people could see the fruits of their labour better."

He turned his small head towards the works and fixed his yellow bird-eyes on the brightly-lit buildings. Lamps like search-lights stood at the entrances and near the administrative building; festoons of small lamps framed a poster that hung near the main gates; and the red flag on the roof of the works was illuminated from below and fluttered in the air like a flame.

Budanov's pipe had gone out. He struck a match, shielding the flame with his hands. The wind was warm; it swayed the thin saplings growing among the flower borders in the garden. The trees had been planted quite recently; each one of them was neatly tied to a strong stake. The wind brought the scent of freshly turned earth and Stoletov recalled how that morning he had seen school children working in the gardens, digging the beds and planting bulbs and roots.

He looked at the apartment house where every window shone brightly; he listened to the panting breath of the factory, to the steady hum of its shops, the high, ringing sound of blows on metal, the frequent chirrup of the electric welders at their work. Could it be only ten years ago since in this place century-old fir trees raised their shaggy tops and under a carpet of snow, moss and bilberries grew over tree-stumps rotten with age?

"You were saying that we ought to put street-lamps in the old village," said Budanov as he pulled at his pipe. "And I'm dreaming of razing the place to the ground. It's an eyesore to me with all its hovels and its wattle fences. We built a whole town in the last ten years, in less than ten, in fact, because during the war we did nothing about houses but built workshops and produced for the front. It's only now that we are getting into our stride. Just you see what we shall do during the next five years. Lovely homes for happy people. And there we have that squalor next door to us, those dingy old cottages which nobody wants except those who have a sense of private property eating into them like rust."

Budanov made a gesture of contempt and suddenly rose from the bench; people had begun to come out of the factory gates. Doors slammed, feet rang out on the pavement, voices echoed, drowning every other noise. A bus driver blew his horn and manoeuvred his charge carefully through

the human flood. People who lived at the other end of the settlement rode in it.

The workers hurried off: Budanov watched them. He waited until the square emptied, took Stoletov and his wife by the arm and walked home. When they parted he said to Stoletov with unexpected feeling, as though continuing some subject they had been discussing:

"I'd like to live another hundred years. I'd like to see what sort of show man can make of things, then I'd die in peace."

4

Stoletov saw Kovalev, the manager of the first machine shop, almost every day. The shop was considered the best in the factory and its reputation was well-deserved: this was the place where advanced production methods were adopted; its workers carefully followed the achievements of other factories and tried to take a leaf out of their book; young foremen from other shops came there for advice when they ran up against snags in their own work.

Kovalev was undoubtedly a fine organizer and an experienced engineer. In spite of his reserved manner, people liked and trusted him. Young people felt drawn to him; he was always glad to help them and paid special attention to them. The old hands had confidence in him and recognized his unquestionable authority in a most varied range of technical questions.

But there were some in the works who did not approve of Kovalev; among them the head technologist, the chief of the construction bureau and the managers of several shops. There was a certain coolness in the way that Budanov, too, spoke of Kovalev: he admitted that Kovalev was a good manager but he told Stoletov once that "that would not last" because Kovalev was restless and cantankerous by nature and might at any moment go off at a tangent.

"He's got no elasticity in his nature," said Budanov. "And that sometimes leads to very much unpleasantness."

"Sometimes the word 'elasticity' is a cloak for something quite different—lack of principle," Stoletov demurred. "Perhaps the situation is something quite different: maybe Kovalev is really showing himself devoted to principle when he is certain that he's right but expresses himself so sharply that he is accused of lacking elasticity."

"Well, I'm not one of those who make a habit of bending over backwards, you know," Budanov said touchily. "But I won't break my head against a wall when you can easily go round it—still less even refuse to look at the alternative. Kovalev, however, subscribes to the crude theory that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and that's the only line he means to take. All the same, he works well and I'm very keen to keep him with us."

Stoletov liked the obstinate uncompromising sort. He, too, did not possess the ability to slip round obstacles that arose in his path, and he sympathized with those who went head on at such obstacles. He liked Kovalev, he liked that invention of his that deserved an attention it had not received. . . .

He had not had an occasion to mention the subject of the "sand shrew" to Kovalev again. His first few weeks at the factory were fully taken

up with a vast amount of organizational work. He had to allot duties carefully to each member of the Communist Party bureau, set up social organizations within the factory, find energetic, efficient people among the large factory collective and assign concrete tasks to these people. He had dozens of people to advise him—Communists and non-Party people, factory workers and engineers. His office became a staff headquarters where at definite times would gather everybody who was capable of exercising an influence over the countless social activities of the collective.

One evening, as he came out of the works trade-union office after a gathering of top-speed operators, Stoletov bumped into Kovalev who had arrived late for the meeting.

"Finished already?" asked Kovalev in surprise. "I thought you had enough to keep you talking till dawn."

"It's a straightforward matter and there wasn't much to discuss," said Stoletov. "We decided as an experiment to draw up a technological chart on the productivity of the best machine-tool operators; special people were allotted to the job and that was all." He stopped, thinking how he could retain Kovalev. "It's a lovely evening," he went on. "A chap needs a breath of fresh air after work instead of sitting up late in a smoky room."

He glanced at Kovalev's dark, tired face and remarked that the shop manager also had the right to some woodland air and a stroll after work.

"I was thinking of going for a stroll. Won't you keep me company?"

Kovalev nodded silently and accompanied Stoletov downstairs.

"You're an old inhabitant," said Stoletov with a glance at his companion. "You decide where we should go. I'd enjoy a walk in the woods. They're fine now in early spring."

"Early spring!" said Kovalev with a laugh. "You can't have noticed what's been happening. Early spring is when the snow hasn't all melted. Why, the poplars in the factory square are coming into leaf now."

"It's true, I haven't noticed. It was early spring when I arrived and since then I've not had time to look round."

They walked along the broad asphalted pavement of the main street, past some tall stone-faced buildings. This street had a completely urban look about it, but as soon as the last of the houses was past, it stopped short, the asphalt gave way to an unmetalled road and real, unspoiled woods began. Silver birches, dappled with young green leaves, displayed their gleaming trunks. The grass was still brown but in one place Stoletov noticed a large patch of tiny white flowers.

"Look, snowdrops," he said to Kovalev who was walking silently at his side. "I'd pick a bunch if I had anyone to give it to. Do you have anybody to give flowers to?"

"No, I'm here on my own," Kovalev replied shortly.

His answer made any further talk on that subject impossible. Stoletov reflected that he would have answered the question differently. He would have said that though he was on his own at the moment, he was expecting his family to join him before long. He walked past the flowers with a feeling of regret: had Varya been there, he would certainly have picked a bunch for her.

They walked on, talking about nothing in particular: a tree whose trunk had been split by lightning, a large bird that flew across the road and set them arguing whether it was a capercaillie or an ordinary grouse,

a snake that flashed in the dry grass. Why was it that a snake bite was more poisonous in the spring than in summer time?

They followed a track deeply rutted by lorry-wheels till they came to a sand-pit. The high sides of the pit reminded Stoletov of the drawing that Kovalev had used to illustrate his design at the technical conference: he remembered that golden-yellow sand, that leafless bush with the withered roots hanging over the edge, just clinging to the earth. He could not resist mentioning the subject to Kovalev.

"I have that picture over my desk," Kovalev replied with a wry smile. "If it made such an impression on you, I'd be glad to give it you."

"If it comes to hanging up pictures, I'd rather have one of a mechanical shovel," Stoletov said. "There's something lovely about a mechanical shovel, something swanlike about its long, finely proportioned jib. Now your machine, if you'll excuse me saying so, reminds me more of a mole."

"A swan is meant to swim and a mole to burrow in the earth," said Kovalev. "It doesn't matter if the thing looks like a mole as long as it works properly."

They sat on a pile of logs that lay near the edge of the sand-pit, and lighted cigarettes. A limpid evening light spread over the ground; mist formed in the hollows; far away in the direction of the factory a train whistled faintly. The sand hissed as it slid down the steep walls of the pit, sometimes checked by a protuberance, sometimes pouring down to the bottom in thin streams.

"I've quite fallen in love with the mechanical shovel," said Stoletov as he watched the sliding sand. "For me it represents a symbol of the might of the machine. . . . I've seen plenty of machines in my time, any number of machine-tools and different sorts of machinery. But the mechanical shovel appeals to me more than anything else. I must confess, Arseni Mikhailovich, that I feel miserable at being cut off from my mechanical shovel."

Picking up a twig, he drew on the ground the slanting arm of a mechanical shovel driving a scoop into the side of a quarry. Kovalev watched in silence as he carefully drew in the teeth of the scoop.

"I understand very well how you must feel, Stepan Demyanovich," Kovalev said with an unusually gentle inflection. "It's always hard to tear yourself away from something you are really keen on. But technically the mechanical shovel belongs to the past. If you mean to look ahead, then you must seek new principles and new methods of construction for excavating machines. People are on the look-out for new ideas and finding them too; you know that yourself."

"But excavators have developed, too," objected Stoletov jealously. "They're always being improved and made more powerful. Think of the walking excavators that the Urals Machine Works are building, for instance."

"An improvement, yes, but still sticking to the old principle. You must agree that a mechanical shovel is, after all, only a shovel: it works just like a navvy; the only difference is in scale."

"Well, that's just the point, isn't it?"

"At present, yes. But tomorrow technique will have advanced. People are already saying that what we need is machines that work in a smooth, continuous motion. Lighter, simpler machines that don't con-

sume such an enormous amount of electricity. Soon they'll be asking for them even more insistently, you may be sure."

Now Stoletov was drawing a mechanical shovel with the arm high in the air, as light and shapely as a ship's mast. Without a look at the drawing, Kovalev rose, walked to the edge of the sand-pit and kicked a stone that lay in the grass. The stone rolled down, drawing after it a cascade of sand. A light trail of dust rose for a moment behind the stone and was at once absorbed in the air.

"It's true there are no limits in technique but there are a great many obstacles on that boundless road and not everyone is capable of overcoming them," said Kovalev as he watched the falling stone. "I, for one, am tired of fighting against obstacles. Tired. I've lost hope. I've given up."

"Do you mean to say you've lost hope in your cause?" Stoletov asked with a glance at Kovalev's broad back. "So you are quite certain that your opponents and not you were right?"

"No, I'm not," replied Kovalev, turning round to face Stoletov. "I'm right. They're not. In fact they aren't real opponents at all; you can't argue logically with them. They don't reject your ideas, but they don't accept them either. They don't refuse you anything, but they withhold their permission for you to do anything. They've dragged things out for three years. I've no strength left. I'm like a fly in a cobweb."

"Who are these 'they'?" asked Stoletov, tossing aside the twig he had been drawing with. "Haven't they got names and jobs?"

"I should say so," said Kovalev with a harsh laugh. "They've quite well-known names and rather important jobs. I'm a mere nobody compared to them. At any rate that's what they think."

"And you're prepared to accept their estimation of you?" The firm lines of Stoletov's mouth were more marked than usual. "You, an engineer and inventor, a citizen of the Soviet Union, a Communist!"

He flung the words at Kovalev as if they were spears. But Kovalev smiled, the way grown-ups smile in reply to the naive indignation of a child.

"Three years ago when I was starting the fight for my machine I thought as you do now," he said. "I thought this way: the national economy needs my machine, the people of the Soviet Union need it. It's bound to be welcomed and taken up without any difficulty, the way many other new machines are. It will be easy, I thought then. . . ."

Kovalev drew close to Stoletov. His tall, broad-shouldered figure towered over the other man and in his voice there was a note of challenge and of accusation directed against someone who had robbed him of a self-confidence that used to be his. One of his big fists was clenched and almost touched Stoletov's shoulder.

"I don't know a thing about you, Arseni Mikhailovich," said Stoletov. He grasped Kovalev's fist and drew him down beside him. "Sit down and tell me everything in the right order. . . ."

And so the two men sat side by side on the pile of logs. As the deep twilight turned into night and the stars came out, a clammy chill crept out of the woods. Stoletov's jacket was thin and he felt cold, but he remained sitting there and listened closely to Kovalev's story. Kovalev made an effort to speak calmly and concisely. It was as though he was tearing off from a mental calendar dates he recalled most easily: the first year of creative research, doubts, persevering work and the joy of

realizing that he was working on the right lines, on something useful; the second year, when the results won general recognition, a patent was issued for the invention, a prototype of the machine was built and passed its tests brilliantly; the third year of struggle to get the machine used on building sites and unheeded requests to get it sent where it could be useful. That was a difficult and very long year, difficult because promises alternated with refusals, because the recognition that had been given to his work was suddenly questioned, because of the interminable tests, exchange of letters and setting up of commissions.



"Nine of them," said Kovalev. "Nine commissions of builders and technicians, experts from head office and workers from scientific research institutes. I don't understand why it is when one commission acknowledges the unquestionable merits of the machine, another one is immediately set up. I've got copies of the findings of those commissions and can show them to you if you are interested."

Kovalev shivered: his jacket was growing damp. The night mist was rising; it had filled the deep sand-pit and was creeping round their feet. The narrow patch of grass where they sat above the sand-pit was now like a mountain-top ringed with clouds.

"That's all. Practically all. I threw up the sponge. The prototype of my machine has been pushed into a far corner of the yard. My letters and queries remain unanswered. Why should I go on writing? Let them go to hell. The work of all those years has gone down the drain, and with it something much more important than work. What's lost is lost."

Kovalev reached abruptly for his cigarette case and lit up. He inhaled deeply. The light of the cigarette cast a pink glow on his tightly closed lips and on one large hand, the hand of a worker. That hand trembled slightly and the light of the cigarette jumped in the darkness.

"I'm sorry I've been such a chatterbox," he said, rather drily. "We ought to be getting back or we'll find ourselves lost in the mist."

They walked home. They passed the birch trees which stood with long drooping boughs, still above the mist. They climbed the hill leaving the mist behind them, and warm gusts of air bearing the scent of pine fanned their faces. Scattered lights lay ahead of them—the houses and the factory where work went on day and night. Kovalev stopped at the first house.

"This is where I live," he said tersely as though repenting of his outspokenness. "Good night. And please excuse me once more for having been so talkative."

He put out his hand. As he shook it, Stoletov said:

"D'you think you could let me see everything you have on that matter? All the papers concerning your invention?"

"I could," replied Kovalev shortly. "Come indoors if you like."

They went upstairs. Kovalev opened the door of his flat with a latch-key. Only one coat hung on the wall of the small empty vestibule—Kovalev's. The flat was dark and quiet. Walking ahead, Kovalev turned on the light and entered what was apparently his study, a room with a large desk, a cupboard, a low sofa covered by a rug, and bookshelves that reached almost to the ceiling.

"Take a seat," he said, pushing an arm-chair up to the desk. "It will only take me a few moments to collect everything I have for you."

He walked over to the cupboard. Stoletov leaned over the desk; he noticed a photograph in a long wooden frame. One half of the photograph was hidden by a faded maple-leaf tucked into the edge of the frame; the other half showed the happily-smiling face of an attractive girl in her teens. On the girl's shoulder a woman's hand rested: Stoletov turned the leaf back and saw a face that was obviously that of the girl's mother, so closely did it resemble her.

"I have practically everything here," said Kovalev, laying on the desk a bulky folder. "The documented history of my ill-fated invention."

He stood waiting for Stoletov to open the folder and start looking through its contents. Stoletov, however, rose to his feet and picked up the folder.

"Would you mind if I took it home with me? I promise not to lose a single paper."

"All right," said Kovalev. "It won't make very interesting reading, I can assure you."

Out in the street, Stoletov glanced up at the darkened windows. Only one showed a light and that was Kovalev's study. What was Kovalev doing now in the flat where that overcoat hung by itself on the hall, where the corridor was haunted by a spirit of forlornness, where that woman's face lay hidden behind a faded maple-leaf? The woman's eyes bore a look of reproach. What was the reason for that look? Lack of attention? Her husband's restless temperament? His inability to get on with people? Or, perhaps, some altogether different reason. . . .

Stoletov walked on thinking about this man and his life, and thinking that from now onwards he had made Kovalev's cause his own.

Back in his own room he caught sight of an unfinished calculation about his excavator-arm lying on his desk. He pushed it aside, opened the folder and began to go through its contents systematically: the certificate registering the invention; the instructions from head office about

the necessity of making a prototype of this useful and interesting machine; reports on the machine's performance on various kinds of work; observations by building workers; an appeal from the factory to have the machine included in its plan and put into mass production. And then more papers relating to various commissions, papers that repeated each other. . . .

He read page after page. Kovalev had exaggerated nothing; the whole affair was incomprehensible. Yes, damn it all, an end had to be put to this bureaucratic mess. There could be no question of retreat, of giving in, of taking the affair lying down.

Who could he enlist in the campaign for the new excavator? Who would speak up for a machine which undoubtedly ought to be made? The man he needed was some leading expert on excavators, one of the top people at head office, perhaps, whose opinion would have weight at the Ministry. That was the kind of man he ought to write to and ask to take an interest in the matter.

Kovalev's mistake was that he had tried to fight on his own, thought Stoletov. But he himself would recruit people to champion the machine wherever he could find them. Then no one would dare to wash his hands of it.

He wrote a long detailed letter that explained everything clearly:

"I ask you very earnestly, Nikolai Mikhailovich, to look into this matter and find a way out of this confused situation. Anticipating your assistance, I remain gratefully yours. . . ."

It was nearly dawn when he finished the letter. Putting all the papers back into the folder, Stoletov addressed an envelope and early in the morning took the letter to the post-office.

There was good news for him there.

"There's a telegram for you, Comrade Stoletov. A letter too," said the girl clerk to whom he handed the letter for registration. "I'll give them to you now, if you don't mind. We haven't sent this morning's post to your office yet."

Stoletov took the letter and telegram and opened them. The letter was from his sons and consisted of two sheets covered with regular rounded handwriting; the telegram was from a graduate of Moscow University applying for work at the Verkhnyaya Kamenka factory. Stoletov gave the telegram a rapid glance, put it away in his pocket and started to read the letter.

His sons' letters were very much alike.

"Dear Daddy, How are you? I am well only I want to see you soon." Both Ivan and Demyan started the same way. Then came news about family affairs, about how it would soon be end of term and hols, but Mummy would still be working, and that was why they would not be able to leave for Verkhnyaya Kamenka at once. "We asked Mummy to let us go with Grandad but she said we will all go together," wrote Vanya. "Grandad asked Mummy to let us go with him but she didn't want it and Grandad got angry," announced Demyan. Then they told him their school marks, sent him kisses and greetings and promises to come and see him soon—all word for word the same as if the boys had copied each other.

Stoletov smilingly reread the letters, picturing clearly the little faces of his sons who resembled each other so much, and thinking that it was

high time that he moved out of the hotel into the flat that was waiting for him.

He decided to lose no time in taking a look at the place and felt in his pocket for the key that the head of the housing department had given him a few days before.

He knew that the house in which his flat was situated stood on the far edge of the new settlement quite near the woods. In his opinion this neighbourhood was the prettiest: it consisted of fairly small brick houses built on the hillside among tall pines which had been preserved together with the undergrowth. The grass was already showing green in the glades between the trees, and bees and butterflies were busy around the yellowing tassels of the pussy willows. Here it was much quieter than on the main street with its tall buildings. Stoletov felt sure that Varya would like the place; it looked more like a holiday resort than a factory housing estate.

He would move that very day, he decided, when he saw the two large well-lit rooms. It was certainly time he started making the place habitable.

When he returned to the factory, he felt himself at home for the first time since he had arrived. He had his flat which he would arrange just as it suited him. His family was going to join him: Varya and the boys and Varya's father—the nearest and dearest people he had in life. They would be waiting for him when he came back from work every evening. He would have to bring Varya and Yelena Protasova together and introduce her to Kovalev and to Budanov's wife, so that she would not find life too dull and be left on her own too much. Then he ought to buy bicycles for the boys—there were such pretty little paths running from the house to the woods. . . .

All the way to the factory he thought about Varya and the children, how he would meet them and how he would try to make everything as comfortable and pleasant as possible. As he slipped off his coat in his office, his nose caught the smell of paint that clung to his clothes. It must be from the flat, he thought, and made a mental note that he would have to give the place a good airing before the family turned up.

Fancy the boys wanting to come on their own! Bright lads! he thought. As he took their letters from his pocket again, the telegram fluttered to the floor. He picked it up and read:

"Graduated with honours Moscow University. Party member since 1952. Desire work your factory on newspaper. Request your agreement. Andrei Korolev."

There was certainly room for someone in that job. A new editor who could turn those dull useless pages into a militant, bright, intelligent paper. A real man who could help him and work with him. Not a Chumov whose statement lay there on his desk untouched.

Stoletov had appealed to the regional committee of the Communist Party several times for a new editor to be sent to Verkhnyaya Kamenka as a replacement for Chumov. But he was told that there was no one available at present for the post and that it was up to the Communist Party organization of the Verkhnyaya Kamenka factory to get rid of Chumov. That organization, however, had plenty of things to worry about besides Chumov. What was more, nobody very much wanted to mix himself up with Chumov.

"To hell with the fellow," Budanov said candidly when Stoletov went

to him for advice. "He'll worry the life out of us with complaints. Say he was sacked for expressing his opinion."

"Let him," said Stoletov. "Why should that worry us?"

"Only that it would mean having to answer those charges at forty different levels. I've had to write a heap of such explanations as it is and I'm fed up with doing it. I agree that the paper's no good whatsoever. But don't ask me to do anything about Chumov. No, thank you, I'll save my nerves for another occasion."

The other members of the bureau were of the same opinion. Syurtukov was the only one who said that he would be delighted to shoot Chumov with any old gun but didn't feel like serving a prison sentence for it afterwards. . . . But there was no doubt the fellow ought to be got rid of. Really got rid of and not moved to another post of responsibility or sent off to a study course. That way of doing things was still in fashion: they sacked a scoundrel whom everybody was sick to death of and put him to study. As if a course of lectures could turn a scoundrel into an angel. Oh no, you can't make a leopard change his spots. . . . Chumov was a malicious slanderer and he would stay one even if he acquired all the learning in the world. . . .

Now as he read the telegram, Stoletov recalled Syurtukov's furious face and smiled. He could rely on one man. Syurtukov was not afraid of slander and complaints.

"Connect with the town, please," he said into his telephone. "I want the press department of the regional committee of the Communist Party."

The receiver croaked and crackled; distant voices reeled off some incomprehensible list; one despairing voice that was louder than the others called: "Where's that cement? Cement, I say. What, you can't hear? Cement."

That must be Koryakov, thought Stoletov; blocking the town line with his cement.

But apparently Koryakov was not on the town line; the voice of the head of the press department drowned the blurred remote conversations.

"Good morning," said Stoletov. "I've had a telegram. I'll read it to you." Then he added: "I think we ought to send for this chap to replace Chumov. Have I your blessing?"

"Get rid of Chumov first."

"We'll get rid of him, don't you worry. We'll raise the matter at the next bureau meeting. It'll be carried unanimously, I'm sure of that."

"That would be good. But what are we going to do with him?"

"That's your affair," said Stoletov unkindly. "Send him wherever you like but the farther from us the better. I am going to send this Koro-lev a wire telling him to come."

Chapter Three

1

The railway journey seemed endless. For the third day the express in which Nikolai and Andrei were travelling had been speeding eastward from Moscow. Their travelling companions changed, unfamiliar towns showed in the window of their compartment and disappeared, bridges that

spanned wide rivers boomed under the wheels of the railway-carriage and then at length they saw in the distance the first foothills of the Urals Mountains.

"Look, mountains," Andrei cried excitedly. "Don't they look fine! We'll soon be there."

Nikolai went to the window with silent unconcern. He looked diffidently at the mountains that were bathed in the light of the newly-risen sun; but they held no beauty for him. Before his eyes shimmered the face of Nina, always Nina, one moment mocking and bewildering, the next tender and inviting.

Nina had come to see him off. She was wearing a white frock and carried a big bunch of flowers which she handed not to Nikolai but to Andrei—making Andrei, who was wearing a new suit and that dark blue hat, look like an actor on tour.

Nina stood among the boys who had come to see them off, and made no attempt to approach Nikolai. Then, when the train was already moving and Andrei, flowers in hand, jumped in last, Nikolai saw that Nina was waving her handkerchief and looking at him with an unnatural strained smile on her face.

How strange that smile had been. . . . Nikolai clearly saw the platform slipping past, Nina, the lads from the college, Boris Ivanovich and, among them all, his mother who stood a little apart from the others, looking frail and old. The hair that lay smoothed on her head was quite white, her cheeks were hollow, her expression dejected. She did not wave; she just watched with sad eyes that seemed to be full of tears.

During those last minutes before the train had pulled out, Nikolai had been thinking only about Nina; he had quite overlooked the fact that he was parting from his mother too. He had had no real talk with her, had not even said good-bye properly. And though she had not reproached him or demanded any attention from him she must have felt hurt and even have shed a few tears on the quiet.

Well, what did you leave behind in Moscow, Nikolai Nikolayevich Zhukov? A fond mother whose feelings you've hurt and a maiden you love but have not been able to tell her so. . . .

"Hey, you day-dreamer. Look up the line, I think that's our station ahead."

Andrei hung out of the window. The wind ruffled his hair; his face, which had grown sun-tanned during the three days in the train, expressed sheer happiness unclouded by doubts or longings. Glancing at Nikolai, he nudged him with his shoulder and made him look out of the carriage. The line humped up in an arc, the steel rails gleamed, from the engine streamed a cloud of vapour that glowed pink in the beams of the rising sun. A town moved from behind the hills towards the train.

"We're there," said Andrei. "Let's go and get our luggage."

Their journey nearly over, Nikolai and Andrei stood on the sun-flooded square waiting for the bus to the factory. They were in the heart of a large, unfamiliar, noisy town. With its bell ringing shrilly, a tram dashed along the hilly street; a trolley-bus, pompous and packed, glided past. Just like in Moscow. The buses, on the other hand, were unlike the Moscow sort—they were small, high and painted blue. They left a termi-

nus where the names of their destinations were written up—places lying far from the railway.

On a post near where Nikolai and Andrei stood, hung a small sign: "Verkhnyaya Kamenka, Belozersk, Vorotilino." Below it was the timetable.

"I say, it's hot," said Andrei, wiping his damp brow. "Definitely tropical. That's the Urals for you."

He cast envious looks at the passers-by in their light summer clothes; at the girls with their sun-burned faces, bare-legged and wearing open-necked frocks. There was a southern look about everything, in that gaily-dressed crowd, in the unfamiliar trees lining the public garden, in the bright blue, utterly cloudless sky.

At last the bus came, as small and high as the others, though, perhaps, more scratched and faded. They were the first in; shoving their hand luggage under the seat, they took off their hats and macks. The bus shot off with a jerk, bounded over the tram lines, cut across the square and made its way up a street that climbed steeply.

They rode on through the outskirts, leaving the town to one side. From a long way off they could still see the pale grey cubes of its tall buildings, an occasional factory with smoking chimney-stacks, a tree-lined avenue running down the hillside. A blinding glimpse of a river under a small wooden bridge, and they were running past small old cottages built of dark, almost black timbers.

Then came a long street of new standard houses enclosed by neat railings without a single shrub growing behind them. Past the houses the bus ran for some time beside a wall. There were several aeroplanes in a field, a big hangar on the far side, and a white airport building surrounded by saplings. The building was light and pleasant with something about it that suggested flight, a suitable place for seeing people off on plane-journeys.

The bus stopped; into it an old woman with a dark woollen shawl round her shoulders heaved herself, followed by a young woman with a basket and a suitcase, then a young man carrying a baby. The baby was squawking loudly; the young man drew it close to his chest and looked furiously at the young woman.

"You're late," said the young woman to the girl conductor. "We've been waiting and waiting. . . . Don't seem to be keeping to your schedule, are you?"

She dumped her things down in the middle of the bus, chose a seat, smoothed her dress and fanned herself with a handkerchief.

"It's as hot as in the Ukraine."

"Where have you been to?" asked the conductor as she gave out the tickets. "Many's the time I've looked for my jolliest passenger."

"We went to stay with an aunt and from there we went to the Crimea for a holiday on the Black Sea," the woman replied, nodding towards the young man with the baby. "His aunt's, I should say. He took me there to meet her."

"Here, take the baby," the young man mumbled irritably without looking up. "Can't you hear the way he's hollering?"

"And is that a reason why I should take him? Hold him yourself or give him to Mum. . . . Come on, Mum, take him, he's pining for you."

Andrei had long given up looking out of the window and was watching

the new passengers. The young woman was giving the conductor an animated account of the amount of cherries she had eaten in the Ukraine: ("A bucketful every day, believe it or not"); what flying in an aeroplane was like: ("Really like being in a bus except when you're flying over the mountains and drop into an air-pocket it tears the heart out of you").

The baby grew quiet. With a sly look at her husband the woman said: "Hand me the lad, you must be fair tired of holding him."

The young man turned away and said nothing. Then the woman stepped over her basket, sat down beside her husband and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Visiting's all right, but it's nice to be home, isn't it?" she cooed. "Are you glad we're back?"

The young man said something to her too quietly for Andrei to catch.

The bus came out into open country. Now the road followed the course of a narrow river. On one side rose mountains covered with pine forest, on the other, there were more mountains with grass growing on the lower slopes and shrubs and trees higher up.

The mountains held the eye with an irresistible power. There were places where the dense coat of green, as thick as bear fur, was gashed by a straight cutting as if some giant's knife had been drawn across the ridge of the mountains. Here and there, near the foot, little groups of cottages lay among the trees. How good life must be here! And now they were passing a place where a grove of tall birches stretched from the woods to the edge of the road.

"Look, have you ever seen birches like those before?" asked Andrei, pointing to groups of trees whose trunks rose together from the ground. "Quick, or you'll miss them."

"Birches. Yes. They're pretty. But look over there. Aren't we coming to another town?"

Across the river they could see the faint, distant outlines of some buildings. Against the background of mountains the buildings looked very white; there were many of them gleaming in the sun and beyond them several tall smoke-stacks.

"What's that place?" Andrei asked eagerly. "What's the name of that town, comrade conductor?"

"That's no town, that's Verkhnyaya Kamenka. We left the town an hour ago."

"It's our factory, Nik."

They leaned out of the window but the road made a turn and the factory slid out of sight behind a low bare hill. Near this hill they saw houses, a few at first, scattered like the cottages of a hamlet, then lining a road. The houses looked very old; their shutters were carved and the blackened fences stood askew. Here and there shutters had been given a fresh coat of paint; they looked like patches of new cloth on a worn-out garment.

But among these cottages suddenly arose high brick buildings obviously of quite recent construction.

"School," said the conductor when the bus stopped near one of these buildings.

"District Soviet," she announced at the next stop.

The miraculous vision of the snow-white town faded. Then from far

off swam into sight an old timber-built fire-watching tower and beyond it a stone church with its cupola in ruins. The young man with the baby stood up, handed his charge to his wife and dragged the suitcase and basket to the exit.

"Well, here we are again," said the old woman. "Thank you for bringing us, lass."

The bus stopped; Nikolai and Andrei picked up their things and got out into the glare of the dusty road.

"How do we get from here to the Verkhnyaya Kamenka factory, please?" Andrei asked the young woman who was watching her husband shoulder the luggage. "Is it far?"

"For some it is but not for us," she replied cryptically with a quizzical look at Andrei. "What's brought you here? Business?"

"We've come to work here."

"Really. Young engineers, I suppose..." she said, her interest aroused. "D'you hear that, Vasya? They've come to work here with us. They'll not manage to get their luggage there. We'll give it to Klava to look after with ours." She at once started to issue her instructions: "You take the kid, Mum, and wait here with him in the shade. You take this suitcase, young man, and you the other one. I'll carry the kit-bag. Come along with me. It's easy to lose your way when you come to a new place, of course. Specially here. Koryakov can't arrange to get a bus running to the factory. It's torture. The bus dumps you down here and you've got to walk the rest of the way. Don't worry though, we'll get there all right. It's less than five kilometres and we can come for the luggage later on in a lorry or ask the management for a bus."

She walked to a cottage which a sign showed to be the bus station and boldly flung open the front door. Behind a table near a low window a young girl sat reading a book. She did not look up when the door creaked but merely placed a finger on a page that the draught threatened to turn over.

"Wake up, Klava, you bookworm. It's me," called the young woman from the door. "I've brought visitors."

The girl raised her head, looked round with dreamy eyes and said calmly.

"Oh, it's you, Dusya."

Then her eyes brightened and she jumped up.

"Why, Dusya dear, where have you been? I haven't seen you for over a month."

"We've been on holiday in the Ukraine. We got into a plane one night and by morning we were there. By the way, we had to wait ages for your old charabanc. I'll come later and tell you all about the times we had, but now take our luggage. This is mine and the other one belongs to these young men. They've come to work at our factory. You know what our Koryakov is. D'you think he'd take the trouble to have anyone meet them? Not he! We'll come this evening for the luggage."

She took command in the bus station as if she was in her own house, and showed her husband and the two young men where to put the luggage.

"Keep an eye on these things," she said. "When you get your head buried in a book, anybody could walk off with them."

Andrei and Nikolai were delighted by their fellow-traveller.

"I'm Andrei Korolev," Andrei told her when they were outside again. "And this is my friend Nikolai Zhukov."

"My name is Dusya," announced the young woman. "This is my husband Vasya Gorlinka, and this is my mother Yelizaveta Ivanovna Syurtukova. My name is Syurtukova, too, because I didn't take my husband's name, me being known as Syurtukova not only in the factory but beyond, too."

"Stop your boasting," said her mother. "Vasya's as well known as you."

"All the worse. Who'd know which Gorlinka was meant when they talked about one of us?"

She did not relieve her mother of the baby but walked on swinging a smart patent-leather bag. They left the highway for a dusty side road.

"Just look at the road," said Dusya. "Can't put a decent surface on it. In autumn a horse could drown on this road before there was time to drag it out of the mud. It's all Koryakov's fault. He doesn't do a thing about the road. Let's take the foot-path; it's farther but it's not dusty."

She led them off the road towards the river. At first the narrow path plunged into the scrub. Tall dry grass grew among the alder bushes. Then it came out on the river bank. Here the river widened and turned into a large lake. On the other side of the lake rose the blue ridge of the mountains clothed in woods, their dark sloping mass spread against the dazzling azure of the sky. Their reflection in the lake made the water seem almost black.

But on the near side the water was bright and transparent as that of a mountain stream. It gently lapped the sandy shore of the lake, the big jagged rocks, the roots of the pines that were exposed on the eroded bank. It glittered in the sunshine, it hissed with the stir of the sand and below it could be clearly seen the sloping bed of the lake, white sand and stones as jagged as those on the bank.

Sometimes the path wound along the bank, then it would slope steeply up to curve round some huge boulder jutting into the lake. Up above there were glades between the trees, where the grass was green and the flowers grew abundantly: big, brightly-hued unfamiliar flowers swayed on long stalks. Over the flowers circled butterflies that matched them in brightness.

"This path runs on to the Park of Culture," said Dusya. "We have to turn off here back to the road to get to the house where we live."

The road ran through a deep cutting with sides that looked as if they had been gnawed away. From here could be seen the factory and those white buildings that Andrei and Nikolai had admired from the bus. The buildings were really white and attractive but from near at hand everything looked different: the houses stood far apart, separated by empty lots with piles of building materials: there were no roads or pavements or, in fact, anything in the way of a street—everything had an unfinished look about it. The bare upturned earth, the planks, the hastily flung-together fences, the incomplete brick building that stood in scaffolding at the end of the track—all had a provisional look about it as if it had but just come into existence on this baking hot, dusty, and utterly barren hill.

"There's our factory," said Dusya with considerable pride. "And there's the factory housing estate. We've arrived. You'll have to keep straight on to that half-finished building over there. We turn right here to the old village. Good-bye for the present."



They were just about to part when Vasya Gorlinka suddenly spoke for the first time since the bus stop.

"D'you happen to be coming to work in the foundry? We're short of technicians there."

"No," said Nikolai. "I'm for the machine shop or, maybe, the designing department or the chief technologist's office."

"You come to the machine shop," put in Dusya. "It's the best shop in the factory. The building's fine. It's wonderfully fitted up. We've a good manager, too. Don't forget—the first machine shop."

"D'you work there?"

"Of course I do. Just ask for Dusya of the electric welders. Anybody will tell you where to find me. I'll be at work tomorrow, so we'll meet."

They took their leave of each other and Andrei and Nikolai walked on. A huge tip-lorry overtook them, throwing up a cloud of dust and petrol fumes. Somewhere a little shunting engine whistled shrilly, and from behind a new apartment house with decorative white balconies on its front crept several goods wagons loaded with metal girders. The engine whistled once more and a high crane that stuck up behind a wooden fence came to life and swung its jib till it stopped over the wagons.

The road finished in a broad asphalted square in the centre of which was a public garden with small flower beds. Round the garden ran blue railings with boards bearing the portraits of the best workers in the factory.

"One day your picture will be up there," said Andrei, nudging Nikolai in the ribs. "But mine will never go up, however hard I try."

Nikolai did not reply. Deeply stirred, he was staring at the wide-open gates of the factory. Beyond them ran an asphalted road, with an even line of shops so new that their bricks were still light pink in colour. There were many of these shops with wide windows shining in the sun; people kept coming out of them and hurrying off somewhere. Then the factory gates closed and the factory yard was seen no more.

On one side of the square stood a two-storey brick building. White curtains hung in its small windows; vases of flowers could be seen. Music from Moscow was coming through a loud-speaker on the roof. A short flight of cement steps ran up to two identical doors that were padded and

covered with black oilcloth. On one of them hung a notice: "Factory Management," on the other "Factory Party Bureau."

Andrei and Nikolai stopped before these doors. Their hearts beat faster. This was their journey's end. What lay ahead of them? What sort of reception would they get? How were they going to get on as members of the vast collective that worked within these walls, beyond the high iron gates?

"Well, this is where we part for the time being," said Andrei. "You go in there," he nodded to the door of the management office—"and I go this way into the Party bureau. . . . Good luck, old man. Don't be nervous."

"Me nervous?" Nikolai quavered. "Don't you worry."

2

The process of removing Chumov from his post as editor of *Tribuna* went quite smoothly. Every member of the Communist Party bureau said his word, and every one of them had serious complaints: the paper was not read in the shops, advanced workers did not contribute to it and it failed altogether to live up to its name.

"It's not a tribune that a leading worker can use, it's Chumov's private tribune," said Lepikhin. "He uses it to sow feuds, to set people against each other, to launch all kinds of vague dirty rumours and hints. In my opinion we ought to remove Chumov from his post as unworthy of our confidence."

"Kick him out and let the Party reprimand him," suggested Budanov. "He should be forbidden to work for the press again."

Stoletov wondered as he listened to all these statements: what had these bureau members been doing all this time? Why, if Chumov was so unreliable, hadn't they got rid of him long before? When he mentioned this, Budanov replied.

"The force of inertia, Comrade Stoletov, that's what it was. There was a time when we did try to get rid of Chumov but then some members of the regional committee of the Party defended him. Chumov hung on to the job like a tick and it wasn't so easy to root him out. That's what happened. . . . Of course, it doesn't do the members of the bureau credit but it does, to some extent, explain the situation."

"Maybe Comrade Chumov had better be sent on a course of study," ventured Poteryayev, a pattern-maker. "We must take into account that the Party organization did not help him."

Chumov, who had been sitting in a corner sweating with anxiety, looked at Poteryayev with eyes full of hope. A study course? That was just what he wanted: a year or two in Moscow with a stipend, opportunities of meeting people on the staff of the central newspapers, and then—promotion, say, to a correspondent's job on a regional newspaper. Then you'd better look out, Verkhnyaya Kamenka. He'd remind them of today's meeting.

All the time Chumov had been jotting down an enormous number of useful facts. Stoletov, for instance, had made Chumov's secret report public to all, describing it as a concoction of slanderous statements and delirious ravings. That deserved noting: he had revealed the contents of a

document that he was warned to keep secret, he had defamed material collected by an honourable Communist. Then the secretary of a shop Party organization had asked for the closing-down of the factory newspaper, the organ of the Party bureau and the factory committee, and what does the Party organizer who is responsible to the Central Committee do but listen to this anti-Party statement with a smile? He would remember that smile one day.

Chumov's pencil slid over the pages of his notebook. He mustn't miss anything, he had to get everything down, every word. . . . What was it Lepikhin had said? "The factory newspaper is a medium for settling personal accounts?" Perhaps he put it a little differently but that didn't matter, no official verbatim record was being taken of the proceedings. Interesting to hear what Lepikhin would have to say when faced with the charge of having slandered a newspaper.

"Will all those in favour raise their hands, please?" said Stoletov. "All those against. Any abstentions? The following motion is carried unanimously: Comrade Chumov is to be relieved of his responsibilities as editor; the regional Party committee is to be asked not to make any further use of Chumov as a journalist."

While Stoletov was slowly dictating the text of the resolution, Syurtukov went on raising a din and calling for a motion to be put to the vote that Chumov should be called to account as a Party member. But the other members of the bureau were apparently so glad to have got rid of Chumov that they obliged Syurtukov to shut up.

"You'll be sorry one day that you left a Party card in such dirty hands," muttered Syurtukov. "Please make a note of my personal opinion: that we should discuss whether he should be allowed to remain in the Party."

"We've taken the vote, Comrade Syurtukov," Stoletov interjected. "The motion was carried unanimously. You voted for it yourself." Then, turning to Chumov, "You heard the resolution. Do you accept what it says?"

"Of course not. I consider it to be a case of suppression of criticism. I shall lodge an appeal against it."

"That you have the right to do," said Stoletov wearily. "Meanwhile, hand over your job to Comrade Poperechny. You may go."

Chumov rose, picked up his notebook and the other papers that lay before him and stuffed them into his letter-case. He took his time over it. Everybody watched him without proceeding to the next item on the agenda. At length, darting angry looks at the members of the bureau, Chumov walked slowly to the door. It was his intention to cut a dignified figure but he did not notice that the strap of his letter-case trailed behind him like a tail.

"We've hounded the rat out of his nest," said Stoletov when the door closed behind Chumov. "But look out, comrades, he'll worry the life out of you in all sorts of committees."

"Oh, we're used to that," said Budanov. "I've addressed sixteen committees on account of his statements already. All in writing. I can pass on my experience to you—the first time you take it to heart and worry about it, then you get angry and protest, and in the long run you write calmly and collectedly."

"Let's have a breather, Stepan Demyanovich," said Syurtukov who

had noticed that Stoletov was ready to proceed with the next item. "It's time for a bite. We've been at it for over two hours."

Stoletov agreed and announced a half-hour break. The bureau members went their ways; only Budanov remained, for he had something to discuss with Stoletov alone. But they did not succeed in starting; Lyuba Zvonaryeva burst into the room, excited, red in the face and tearful. She was still sobbing when she sat down beside the desk; her cheeks were tear-stained, her nose swollen, and the girl who was usually so pretty and self-assured, had turned into a little girl whom someone had offended.

"I can't go on," she sobbed. "There are so many men in the factory. . . . I can't manage them. . . . Let me go. Make somebody else secretary. I'll go back to the lab. You'll have to give the post to a man."

They looked at the girl with astonishment; they had always considered her such a fighter and here all of a sudden was this faint-heart.

"Now, now, calm yourself. Have a glass of water," said Budanov. "Somebody else may come in, you know. . . ."

Lyuba Zvonaryeva had not been secretary of the Comsomol committee for long. When she entered the factory two years before, after studying at a technical school, she started in the laboratory of the foundry department. She was popular from the start. She was certainly a first-rate worker. Even the jaundiced lab manager had to concede that Zvonaryeva's analyses were always dead accurate, that she did not grudge time re-checking any doubtful test, that she was zealous in the pursuit of knowledge and that she read a great number of technical books on her subject.

Besides that, Lyuba was active in social work. . . . She had a bold manner and a caustic tongue, was not afraid of speaking in public, did with ardour everything that was assigned to her and, when elections to the Comsomol committee came round, was at the head of the poll. She flung herself passionately into Comsomol work, demanding from the other factory organizations their constant attention to the interests of young people and raising a storm whenever she felt this attention to be inadequate.

Lyuba often came to see Stoletov. She had been waiting impatiently for the break in the bureau meeting that morning.

"Last night the whole hostel in the old village went on the spree," she said through her sobs. "I tried to break it up but not one of the older people helped me. What could I do on my own? They were fighting; one of the moulders got his hand broken. He was sent to hospital today."

"Is he in the Comsomol?" Budanov enquired.

"Yes. What of it?"

"Well, you're responsible for what happened, aren't you?" Budanov retorted hotly. "Oh, it's no good your looking as if you didn't care. Don't you think the event is pretty extraordinary?"

"I do. Otherwise I wouldn't be here. . . ."

She turned away from Budanov and suddenly caught sight through the window of a number of lads in trainee uniform standing about in the yard keenly discussing something. They were not, in fact, trainees; they had left the training school a year before but were still wearing their uniforms. What were they fooling about there for during working hours? If Budanov happened to glance out of the window too, he was bound to ask her that. He wouldn't look, though. He was sitting at the table. He couldn't see them from there.

But Budanov did see them. He rose to his feet and looked out of the window.

"What are those lads doing out there?" he asked. "The dinner-time hooter hasn't gone, has it?"

"It hasn't," said Lyuba. "Perhaps they worked on the night shift, though."

"Then what are they doing in the factory? Oh no, they're not on night shift. They've merely slipped out of the shop to bask in the sun."

Some men walked past the boys. None of them stopped to ask why they were fooling about in the yard. Budanov leaned out of the window and shouted:

"What's the meeting going on there! It's about time you finished your palaver, isn't it?"

The lads scattered in all directions.

"See that?" Budanov triumphed with a derisive look at Lyuba. "They're not on night shift."

"I saw. But what can I do about it? Why don't the foremen keep an eye on them? Poor sort of foremen they are to let their workers gad about with nothing to do. Do you want to hold me responsible for the entire factory? You might at least look after the hostels—isn't that the management's business? Things aren't so good there, you know."

"The management furnished those hostels like sanatoriums," said Budanov. "Carpets, mirrors, spring mattresses. . . ."

"Carpets! Yes, there are carpets. But who looks after the hostels? And what about the hostel wardens? Who have you given that job to? In that hostel where the fighting went on last night the warden himself was boozing with the boys. We warned you what to expect but you left him in the job. . . . I went there yesterday. I was going to appeal to his conscience. But d'you think he helped me? He just sat and smirked when Yasha Milovidov got fresh with me. . . . I left the place and sent a militiaman there—I met one on the road. No, it's no good, you need a man for the job. I'll go back to the lab."

"Who is the warden at that hostel?" Stoletov asked. "We must get rid of him at once."

His grave, frowning glance at Budanov demanded an answer. Budanov, however, averted his eyes and said grudgingly that he did not know who the warden was and had no idea who could be sent to replace him.

"It wouldn't hurt the Comsomol to think about how to provide young workers with some counter-attraction to drink," he added. "The question isn't going to be settled merely by sacking the warden."

"Stop the sale of vodka, then," said Lyuba. "There are three booths out there near the factory gates. What do you think they sell there? Vodka and beer. The boys come out of the factory with their pay in their pockets. Come on, out with it, why walk any farther for a drink? There's only one thing to do: stop the sale of vodka here."

"As for these booths, you're right; we'll stop them selling vodka," said Stoletov. "They can sell lemonade and soft drinks. You show initiative; you can always count on us to support it if it's good."

Lyuba, her tearful look turned to one of anger, tidied her hair which was combed high over her smooth forehead; she dabbed at her flushed face with a tiny handkerchief and waited impatiently for Stoletov to finish what he had to say so that she could fling herself into the fray again.

"Oh, of course, initiative's a splendid thing," she said caustically. "But who is supposed to support that initiative? The Party organization and the factory management, aren't they? I've been Comsomol secretary for how long and there's been no lack of initiative with us, but nobody's given us any help and we've only done a tenth of what we could have done. Hundreds of times we were given promises, and resolutions were made, and the bureau listened to what we had to say. And what was the result? Precisely nil."

"That's bad. You should have been helped. We'll try and do better in future," said Stoletov. "Let's come to an agreement. No more tears; we'll keep those for something else. No getting panicky about every brawl. Of course brawling's a bad thing but the important thing to know is what causes it. Why is it, Lyuba, that there are still young people who go in for playing cards all night and getting tight and scrapping? Can you tell me that?"

"It's because they're bored."

"Bored? That's impossible. How can you be young and bored? I'm not young but I never get bored."

"You don't, but they do."

There was defiance in the retort.

"Well, well, think of that," said Stoletov, shaking his head. "Boredom. What a dreadful thing. Are there so few interesting things for a man to do? Fishing, for instance. Or hunting. Or reading a good book. And what about dancing with a pretty girl? Or joining the drama circle? There's an endless number of interesting things to do in the world."

"Oh, there are some who go in for dancing or hunting or playing in the band. But it's not everybody. Some find it interesting but others get bored. For them we've got to find something specially interesting."

"We've got lads of all sorts," said Budanov. "Take Sharov, the foreman. You can consider him among the youngsters, can't you? He's only twenty-two, not long out of technical school. He's never bored. Not he! The day's never long enough for him; he's always on the hop, always busy with something. He goes in for rowing and skiing and hunting, too; and he likes to dance. But then there's Yasha Milovidov. He knows his job all right, that bright lad does. But do you think he makes a good thing of his life? Not he. For Yasha life's just drinking and brawling and beating up his wife. But why, God only knows. The Comsomol doesn't teach him anything."

"I refuse to teach Yasha Milovidov anything," cried Lyuba, her cheeks ablaze. "Let the militia do the teaching."

"You're wrong," said Stoletov. "He doesn't refuse to teach others himself, you know. He started on that turner of yours, Nazarenko. They used to go to restaurants and play the fool together. Luckily Nazarenko got interested in playing the trombone—and the trombone won. There are others who don't find counter-attractions and then Yasha proves the stronger. Before he gets into the hands of the militia he'll have taught no few Comsomol members his own ways. Life, you know, doesn't run so smoothly for everyone; not always according to the book or the plan. In real life we can't afford to refuse to fight those who hinder us from living and working. Only cowards refuse to fight and I don't think Lyuba Zvonaryeva is a coward, is she?"

Lyuba was going to say: "No, I'm no coward," when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," called Stoletov.

A tall good-looking young man wearing a blue hat and a well-cut suit strode into the room.

"I'm looking for Comrade Stoletov," he said, glancing from Budanov to Stoletov.

"I'm Stoletov. What do you want?"

"I came from Moscow at your request. To work on the factory newspaper."

Chapter Four

1

The shop manager looked Nikolai over with appraising eyes and fired quick, short questions at him: Where had he studied? Had he worked at any other factory? Where and with whom? Nikolai tried to make his answers sound calm and self-confident; as if two engineering colleagues were having a talk, one young, the other rather older—just talking over some serious matter concerning their work. That meant being careful not to behave like a student in the presence of a professor. Let the shop manager understand from the beginning that he was not dealing with a mere lad but with a man who had seen something of life.

"D'you think you'd manage the job if we put you in charge of a turnery?" the shop manager asked him. "The present foreman has to go to another job."

Nikolai took fright, and was about to ask for a less responsible post when he remembered that degree of his.

"I'll have a shot at it," he said huskily.

"That's the spirit. Come and have a look over the section. I'll send for the foreman straight away; he'll show you the ropes."

Nikolai was expecting to see a solid, practical man who was being removed so that the turnery could be strengthened by the presence of a foreman with higher education. He anticipated a certain feeling of embarrassment in meeting this old fellow who was making way for him, and wondered how he could soften the blow.

Perhaps he would do better to turn down the job of foreman and ask to work instead as the old fellow's assistant. He would teach him in the evenings and help him to grasp the technical knowledge he lacked.

Nikolai imagined them studying together somewhere in the factory library or at the old worker's house. And he looked quite indifferently at the young man in dark overalls who came into the manager's office.

"Let me introduce you," said the manager, turning to Nikolai. "Here's your replacement, Sharov. Now you'll be able to transfer to the third shop."

The young man shook hands joyfully with the embarrassed Nikolai and asked his chief how many days he would give him to hand over the section. Then he led Nikolai into the shop.

"You studied in Moscow, didn't you?" he began, the moment they left the office. "I was at Sverdlovsk. At the machine-building technical school. I've been here a year and had four months in this shop. From the time it was opened. There's a new shop starting now. That's where I'm

going. . . . It's going to turn out mining equipment and that's something I'm specially interested in."

"And what do we make here?"

"Depends on the order. The place hasn't settled down to any special line yet. One thing today and another tomorrow."

As they walked through the shop, Nikolai looked anxiously into every corner. The large high-roofed shop looked rather empty and half-built. Perhaps that was because of the unplastered brick walls, or because there seemed to be so few machines in the place: they were all placed together near the windows, leaving the middle of the shop quite free. Anyway, Nikolai's first impression of the shop was not a favourable one.

"I was told this was the best shop."

"You were told right, but we've got another machine shop opening. It's just been built. Everything there has to be organized from scratch. That's why I'm being sent there. As an old experienced worker."

Sharov spoke in all seriousness, without the hint of a smile; Nikolai stole a glance at him. His companion had not the least resemblance to an "old experienced worker"—he was a rather lean young man of no great height wearing oil-stained overalls and a cap with a button on the top, tilted over one ear. From under the peak protruded a thick lock of hair that was much lighter than the sun-burned face; there was a bold look in the grey eyes below his fair brows. The chap was his own age, even a bit younger, perhaps. Yet he was being entrusted with the organization of a new workshop.

This thought comforted Nikolai. Till then everybody Nikolai had walked past seemed to be looking back at him with an air of derision—just look what a youngster has been appointed foreman! Now he felt encouraged, more self-assured.

By the time he reached his future section he had a confident air and was trying to show that there was nothing new to him in what he saw there. He paid little heed to the words of his companion when Sharov stopped at various lathes and praised them for their accuracy and for other fine qualities.

"I know them," he said offhandedly. "I took my practical courses last year in a factory that made lathes like these. But at that time they were designing a new lathe, much more powerful and capable of being run much faster."

He wanted to show Sharov that he had seen factories and shops that were as good as this one, and that there was not the least justification for treating him as a novice to be taken round on a sight-seeing tour. His reference to the new lathe made a deep impression on Sharov. He at once drew Nikolai to his desk and asked him whether such lathes were going to be in production soon. Did he think it possible that the new shop might get some of those very lathes? What changes and improvements in design would there be?

Nikolai was not able to answer all his questions. He knew nothing about the lathe's performance, for he had taken his practical course in the chief mechanic's department and it was only from what he had heard at a production conference that he knew the designing bureau was working on that new lathe.

"I don't think the lathe is in mass production yet, so it is unlikely

that you'll get them soon," he said haltingly. "The designers were only working on the blue prints at that time."

"But that was last year! Why, a good twelve months have passed since then. They must have got on with it."

Nikolai had to admit that during that year he had not been near the factory and that he knew nothing of the fate of the lathe. He conscientiously tried to recall everything he had heard about the lathe but that did not amount to much.

"With the old type of lathe the rotation speed is limited. Well, in the new lathe the idea is to have a lot of speed in reserve. At the present time we can't use such high speeds; we haven't got suitable cutting-tools and so forth. But if those tools turn up, if we find a cutting material that will stand up to super-speed work, then the lathe will be able to do the job. That's not so with the ones we use now."

"I see. Speed in reserve, that's one point. And what else?" Sharov looked at Nikolai impatiently. Nikolai racked his memory for every other detail that the designer had mentioned in his lecture.

"You don't know much, I must say," said Sharov reproachfully. "You ought to have found out every detail about that lathe. Do you think we'd get a reply if we wrote and asked them about it?"

Quite naturally Sharov had started addressing Nikolai in the friendly second person singular. Nikolai responded likewise: why should they, both of the same age, speak to each other in any other way. They sat down side by side at the desk near a large window against which a recently planted sapling tapped a twig. Workers kept coming up to the desk. Sharov explained things to some of them, issued instructions to others, sent some off on errands, but kept returning to his conversation with Nikolai. He told him that he was planning to enter the polytechnical college, that he would take the entrance exams but was afraid he would muff in English which was a subject he could not manage.

"We learned German at school, you see. And at the technical school, too. And now, just think of it, they pop this English at you. I don't need to get an excellent in it, damn it all, I could scrape through with a fair."

Nikolai promised his help—he had always done well in English—and said that Sharov could count on his help in any other subject he found difficult. But Sharov said that he preferred to deal with difficulties on his own.

A young man in a light suit came up; Sharov introduced him to Niko-



lai as an engineer from the shop's technical control department. The engineer ran a searching, appraising eye over Nikolai's suit and hat, muttered a few words through his teeth and asked Sharov to go with him to his department. Sharov left, telling Nikolai that he would be back in a few moments. Nikolai rose and walked along the line of lathes in his section.

Most of the lathes were operated by very young turners; a little apart from them, near the window, were two lathes operated by older workers. Everything was running smoothly except at one lathe, which had stopped; near it stood a pink-cheeked youth struggling to make his casting secure in the chuck.

Nikolai stopped behind this worker and watched his clumsy movements.

"Let me give you a hand," he said. "Come on, move over."

The turner looked him up and down, frowned and muttered that he would manage by himself. Nikolai shouldered him out of the way, secured the casting with rapid confident movements and brought the cutting-tool up to it.

"Now get on with it. Call me when you need to change the piece. I'll show you how to do it."

The turner went on frowning at him and took a shaving. Nikolai walked on with a feeling of satisfaction: one way or another, he had given his first orders to a worker in his section. He saw Sharov coming towards him. Sharov held several small couplings in his hand and was examining them carefully as he walked. His face looked grim, his pale eyes were angry, red spots burned on his cheeks.

"What's up? What are you doing with those couplings?" asked Nikolai.

"Going to throw them down the drain," replied Sharov, hurling the couplings on the desk. "He deserves to be flogged, the bastard. You'll have to deal with him when he comes on evening shift. I warn you, though: he knows how to play on your feelings by pretending to be oh, so unhappy; he can whine and grovel and promise you anything. But once he's left on his own all his promises are thrown to the wind. Yet he can work if he wants to. He's got a gift for it only he drowns that gift in a beer mug. You stand up to him, though, that's the main thing," Sharov went on firmly, forgetting that Nikolai had no idea whom he was talking about. "He's a gay spark. He sings, he plays the accordion and when he feels in the mood he works better than anybody. But that's all on the surface. Inside he's empty. . . . Anyway, you'll find that out for yourself. Now let's have a look at the lathes."

"But what's the fellow's name?" asked Nikolai, alarmed at the prospect of having to deal with such a man.

"Milovidov. Yasha Milovidov. Oh, to hell with him. You have a look at the machines."

Sharov was eager to be off to his new shop the next morning and was impatient to hand over to Nikolai. Not sparing Nikolai's new suit he made him examine and handle and test the lathes. He laid several cutters on Nikolai's knees—the very best cutters, that were to be kept for the most important jobs. The tools were thickly coated with grease and left dark stains on Nikolai's trousers. Sharov told him that petrol removed stains perfectly and thereupon presented Nikolai with a bottleful, informing him that it was pure aviation spirit.

Sharov knew his way about the place perfectly. Everything was in exemplary order and of the very best quality. Or did he only imagine that everything in his turnery was the finest, tip-top, better than anywhere else? Anyway, Sharov firmly believed that was so and handed over everything to Nikolai with the air of entrusting him with a priceless treasure.

"Don't you start giving it out too freely," he warned. "We have chaps who don't put a thing aside or save up and then come running to beg. The things they lose. And spoil. I gave my calipers to one of our cadgers and he returned them to me all bent. You might think he'd been driving nails in with them."

At the end of the shift Sharov got ready to leave and suggested to Nikolai that they should go and look at the new workshop. Now, there was a building job for you. Close to the roof, workers were moving carefully along planks, putting the glass in; the carpenters were fixing frames of white freshly-sown wood into the window openings, painters were painting the office cubicles, concrete-layers were pouring the foundations for the machines. The place smelt of paint, fresh-sawn wood and upturned earth.

In one corner machines were being installed. That was where Sharov was heading for. Catching sight of something from a distance, he left Nikolai and ran to the construction supervisor.

"Put the lockers in later. I asked you that, didn't I?" he called. "Everything's to be done in the right order. We told you how to do it."

The man turned his back on him and went on issuing instructions to the workers who were fixing the lockers; Sharov rushed to the door threatening to bring immediately the chief technologist, the chief engineer, the entire management, in fact.

"See you tomorrow," he called to Nikolai. "They're upsetting the entire technological process."

Nikolai, too, left the building. He stopped outside of his own shop, not quite certain which was the right door. While he hesitated, one of the doors was flung open and out came a young man wearing a shirt embroidered at the neck. Nikolai recognized him as a turner in his section who had come up to Sharov and complained about a faulty tool. Sharov gave him another one and afterwards told Nikolai that the man's name was Vladimir Nazarenko, that he worked well and, moreover, was interested in music. Now Nazarenko was in a hurry to leave the shop; he all but tripped over Nikolai as he rushed by, burdened with an enormous, brightly-polished brass trombone.

Without a glance at Nikolai, Nazarenko went towards the factory gates. He was anxious to lose no time; and holding his trombone with both hands soon broke into a run. No longer in doubt, Nikolai opened the door resolutely and walked into the shop.

Sharov's place was empty. Nikolai hung up his hat, sat down and looked around. Only one of the lathes in the section was idle; a young man with a pale, narrow face was approaching it with a light, springy step. His movements were quick, his dark liquid eyes gay. But when the man reached his lathe, Nikolai noticed that under one of those eyes lay a puffy purply-grey bruise and that he was carrying the spoiled couplings Sharov had shown him, tossing them playfully into the air as he walked.

Nikolai watched the fellow with interest. He saw him stop in front of his lathe, toss the couplings to the ground, place a casting in the chuck,

bring up the tool and begin to work. There was speed, precision and beauty in every movement and, at the same time, a touch of casualness, as if the man wanted to show everybody that for him work was child's play, that, if he felt like it, he could turn the most complicated piece out of any casting without the slightest effort.

Nikolai kept his eyes on the turner so long that the man noticed it and smiled back defiantly; the blood rushed to Nikolai's cheeks.

He ought to say something to the man about the couplings he had spoiled the day before, thought Nikolai; but he would leave that to Sharov. After all, he had not taken over from him yet.

Nikolai remained seated at his desk although there was absolutely nothing for him to do—not that he would have known it if there had been. He was afraid that the workers in his section might notice his inactivity, so he took a notebook out of his pocket, furrowed his brows deeply, and started a letter to Nina.

"So here I am at the factory, my dear Nina," he began. "I have been appointed to one of the best shops where I'm going to work as foreman. You'd probably be surprised to see this shop, it's so big and marvellously equipped. . . ."

When he had described the whole shop he decided that Nina would not find it interesting and tore the page off his pad. That was not the way to write—he ought to tell her how lonely he felt without her, how she was never out of his mind. That, however, would not have been true: he had not given Nina a thought all day.

He decided to write his letter in the evening when he had settled in his new room. Now he would go and look for Andrei.

He took another turn between the lathes. His face wore a look of deep concentration. He picked up from the floor a cap that someone had dropped, and shyly laid it on the next lathe he passed.

"Find out who it belongs to and return it," he mumbled without glancing at the girl in charge of the lathe. She eyed him with interest. "It was lying near your lathe. . . ." Making an effort not to hurry or betray his acute embarrassment, he took his own hat from the desk, put it on and walked out of the shop.

2

The *Tribuna* office was not housed in the main building with the factory management, the Party bureau, the trade-union committee and other organizations: it shared a small cramped building near by with the print-shop, the Party committee reading-room and the Comsomol committee office.

When Andrei and Stoletov walked into the editor's office, they found it occupied by a young woman who was sitting at a typewriter. The broad checked smock she wore failed to conceal her condition of advanced pregnancy.

"Where's Chumov?" asked Stoletov. "See if you can find him for me, please, Valentina Ivanovna."

"He's left for town," the young woman replied with alarm. "He took a file of back-numbers, gave orders for proofs of what we have standing in type and took them with him too. He said he wouldn't be back."

"Well, that's that," Stoletov smiled. "Then find me Vanya Pope-rechny."

The typist left the office. Stoletov showed Andrei to a large desk that stood near the window.

"Here's where you work. Get going. Not much of an outfit just now; the last editor didn't try to expand it."

Poperechny turned out to be quite a youngster; he wore an embroidered Ukrainian shirt and his fair hair lay in such neat curls that Andrei found himself wondering whether a barber's tongs had not had a hand in their creation. The young man shook hands with Stoletov rather shyly and looked at Andrei curiously.

"Been in the library, I suppose," said Stoletov, glancing at the thick, shabbily-bound book in Poperechny's hand. "Still reading novels, I see. But you missed your lecture again, I heard from Vasili Nikitich."

"I was making up the paper," replied Poperechny, slipping the book into a drawer. "I explained to Vasili Nikitich but he didn't want to listen. I have to do the job entirely on my own."

"Well, you won't be on your own any longer. Let me introduce you to your new editor. Show him the ropes."

Stoletov asked Valentina Ivanovna how she was feeling and whether she was soon going to take her maternity leave. The young woman blushed and at once her face became quite childish.

"Yes," she whispered. "In about three weeks' time."

"You can see for yourself what a mess we're in," said Poperechny with a shrug, as soon as Stoletov had left the room. "The editor was sacked and went off without handing over to his successor. Valya's going on leave and there'll be nobody to type the copy. It takes the comp. a whole day to set from manuscript."

Other complaints followed: the print-stop was upside down, the best comp. had left two months ago and there were learners on the job now; why, the printer had to help them. The printing-press was old and kept breaking down. The guillotine was out of order—the paper for the whole edition had to be cut by hand. There was no standing copy ready for the next few numbers.

"You see what a fix we're in," Poperechny gabbled on. "When a correspondent comes from the regional newspaper, he takes a whole brief-case full of copy away with him. He gets the chief engineer and the head-designer and anybody he likes to write for the paper. But we can't get a thing out of them. Doesn't make any difference how much I ask and beg and nag people about it—you'd think they were all deaf. Chumov, the last editor, quarrelled with everybody, you see. Well, there it is, it's an awful mess. The only people who'll write for us are poets. I announced a competition for the best poem about our factory. You should have seen the number of entries there were. But they were pretty bad. I had to rewrite them myself. One comrade sent in a poem that I gave a whole column to. That was no good either. People complained that there wasn't a line in the paper about production, only poetry. The result is I have to write everything myself. I run about the shops and talk to people, and there's my story. Of course I always sign it with the name of the person I talked to."

Andrei had learned from Stoletov how bad things were with the paper but he heard Poperechny out. He listened attentively to everything: about the good comp. who went off to work as a hostel warden after quarrelling with Chumov and about the literary circle that used to be run by the paper under the auspices of the chief librarian but which folded up when Chumov

offended the librarian and declared that such circles were the business of the club, not of the paper.

Then Vanya showed the new editor the print-shop, a long, narrow room with little space to spare. Near the window stood cases of type, and near the door a printing-press and the useless paper-cutter. A dour-faced, elderly printer was lazily printing sheets with some small announcements on them.

"What's that you're printing?" asked Poperechny. "Oh, another job for the housing and public amenities department! How long are you going to keep this up? You can't print the paper, but when it's a matter of doing something for those people, the press seems to work perfectly."

The printer looked disdainfully at Poperechny and went on with his printing without a word. Andrei picked up one of the printed sheets: it contained the house rules and regulations for the hostels—a long list of items each of which began with the words "It is forbidden."

"That's the whole outfit," said Poperechny when they had reached the office again. "You can see the conditions we have to work in."

"Let's have a look at some back-numbers and the plan for the next few numbers, and then, maybe, you'll take me round the factory? I've got to know something about that, after all."

"Of course I will. Only you must be hungry after travelling, aren't you? And what about arranging your lodgings? Have you done anything about that?"

"Stoletov rang up about it. They promised to send someone over here."

"That's no good. They'll shove you in somewhere you won't like at all. Valya!" said Poperechny to the typist, "be a sport and use our newspaper's influence to get the editor a room at the Stalingrad."

"I want a double room, I came with a friend," said Andrei. "He's an engineer. He's gone to the personnel department to see about his work."

Valya nodded and went out. Poperechny brought a file of back-numbers and the plan for future work and laid them on the desk. Andrei found the paper dull and its language not particularly grammatical. He could make no headway with the plan; to understand it he would have to learn something about the factory, its production programme and how work was going. Poperechny proposed that they should visit the main shops, to which Andrei readily agreed.

They went outside. The sun was setting and the distant mountains were growing dark. The white plaster figure of a young worker near the factory gates was turning pink, the sunset glowed in the windows of the management offices.

"I'll take you to the foundry first," said Poperechny. "It's near the gates and, after all, it's the place where everything begins."

There was no mistaking the foundry. The dust from the moulders' sand on the way to the doors and the grimy windows left no doubt that this was no machine or assembly shop but a place of heavy, dirty work.

"This way," said Poperechny, pushing open a wicket-door in the broad gates. "They do both iron- and steel-melting here."

How many foundries are there in the Soviet Union? And each one is different. Each factory has its own features that distinguish it from others, something that gives it individuality. A factory scene cannot be a mere repetition of another factory scene any more than a meadow or a wood or a ploughed field in different parts of the Soviet Union can repeat

itself, although birch trees grow in the woods near Moscow as well as in the Urals and corn ripens in kolkhoz fields in Siberia as well as in the Ukraine. But nobody mistakes the forests of the Urals for those of the Moscow region, or the plough-lands of the Kuban with the sweeping steppes of Siberia. And no matter how many foundries you may see in your life you will never confuse one with another.

The foundry that Andrei and Vanya Poperechny walked into was strikingly large—that was the first impression it gave. It was a great square crowned by a vast roof of glass. The glass was sooted and through it the sky looked sullen and threatening; inside the shop it was gloomy, too, although the sun was shining out of doors.

The huge shop was quieter and emptier than Andrei expected. The workers, bent over the moulds, were quite lost in it. The chains hung lifeless from the overhead cranes. The distant corners of the shop were dark and deserted.

"Why's the place so empty?" asked Andrei whose idea of a workshop was bound up with the ones where his father and he had worked—the machine shop in an old Moscow factory with its many workers and closely-ranged machine-tools.

"This building has only just been finished," explained Poperechny. "It was planned on this scale to be ready for the time when the factory's working full blast. But we've still got many shops to be built and that's why the place looks empty. . . . But there are more workers here than you think. We're not short of them."

Andrei cast Poperechny a look of respect. Here was a chap who knew what he was talking about.

"Show me round. I'm interested in everything."

"I can show you round the foundry. I used to work as a moulder before I went on to the paper. But I shan't be much help to you in the other shops. I get lost with machine-tools. I might make mistakes. But we'll always find somebody to show us round."

It was hard to imagine Vanya Poperechny, so spotless with his flaxen hair and eyebrows, working as a moulder and going about looking as dirty as the people around them in this building. But judging from the way he pushed a moulder aside, went up to a moulding box, picked up a shape and, not being afraid of getting dirty, grasped a mechanical ram and made it jump and drive down the sand into the already prepared moulding box, he had certainly worked here before.

"So you've not forgotten the job," a lanky man in dirty overalls said approvingly. "Still writing poetry? It's a long time since I've read anything of yours."

"I've given up writing poetry, Comrade Lepikhin," said Poperechny, handing the ram to a worker. "Or, to be more exact, I write for myself now, not for the press."

"That's a pretty daft thing to do, in my opinion—writing for yourself," said Lepikhin. "I bet they're not really for yourself. Isn't there some girl you show them to for her opinion?"

He was about to give Poperechny a friendly slap on the back when he looked from the snow-white shirt to his grimy hand, smiled and dropped his arm.

"Instead of ragging a chap you'd do better to meet the new editor," complained Poperechny, adding significantly: "He's come here from Moscow."

Lepikhin took a good look at Andrei's well-built figure, and made a mental note of his candid smile and debonair appearance.

"Ever been a sailor?" he asked with a friendly smile.

"No. I worked in a factory. At a milling machine." Then, because he did not want Lepikhin to take him for an experienced machine operator, he added quickly: "Only for two years, though. Afterwards I went to university."

"A milling machine, eh? Well, that's not a bad trade, either. Drop in to see us. We'll find something for you to write about."

Lepikhin walked away. Poperechny looked after him with admiration. He forgot all about Andrei and only jerked to his senses when the hooter sounded to mark the end of the shift.

"Would you like to see the first machine shop?"

But Andrei told him that he was expecting his friend to come to the office after the shift. That was what they had agreed.

"That suits me," said Poperechny. "Between you and me and the gate post I've got to be somewhere myself after the hooter. Valya will take you along to the Stalingrad."

He saw Andrei back to his office and went off saying that he would be sure to drop in at the Stalingrad later to settle what to prepare for the next number.

"I'll get hold of all we have," he called over his shoulder. "We've got something in type as well as some manuscript copy."

Andrei had not been in the office many minutes before the door creaked again and in came Nikolai. His pace was leisurely; with a nod for the typist he sat down sedately on a wooden bench. His face wore an expression of indifference but Andrei knew very well that something lay behind that studied look.

The new light-grey suit Nikolai took such pride in was covered with dark stains. His hands were spotted with grease. There were grease-spots even on his face. All this, and that air of independence and the way he lolled on the bench told Andrei that something highly important had happened to his friend.

"How did you get on? What shop are you going to be in?"

"The first, of course." Nikolai's tone was casual. He paused, then went on with studied indifference: "I've been appointed foreman of a turnery."

Andrei spun round and said with a sigh of deep sympathy:

"Foreman? And there was I thinking you'd be appointed shop manager."

The Stalingrad was a handsome buff-coloured building with small white moulded balconies in front. The ground floor was occupied by a large provisions store and a hairdressing saloon.

"Here we are, up that staircase," said Valya. "Go up to the fourth floor and ask for Sasha. He's the hostel warden."

"Why's it called the Stalingrad?" asked Andrei.

"That's because they were just starting to build it when the battle of Stalingrad was over. They didn't get very far with it then, of course. Only laid the foundations and that wing on the right there. The rest was completed quite recently. In this part of the building there's a youth

hostel. For the trainees. Boys in the old wing, girls in the new one. The top floor is kept free for visitors."

The staircase divided between each floor to meet in large well-lit landings. There were pictures on the walls of these landings—brightly coloured paintings of lakes and mountains and meadows with remarkably large flowers growing in them.

"Pure formalism," said Andrei, pausing in front of one flower painting. "Have you ever seen daisies that size? Nature doesn't make 'em that size. They're more like sunflowers."

"Perhaps the artist wanted to improve them. . . . Anyway, how do you know there aren't such daisies in the Urals? Perhaps there are."

"Well, perhaps there are," Andrei conceded. "If the Urals can make a foreman out of Nik they must have daisies that size."

They ran up to the top landing where Sasha the warden, a young man with an abundance of tiny freckles, handed them the key to their room.

"The beds are made up," he told them. "If you need anything come and ask me for it. I'm always here."

The room was rather small and unbearably white. So white were the walls that the bed linen—also new—looked somewhat grey. The identically-folded pique counterpanes, the writing desks, the bedside lockers were all new and looked as if they had never been used before.

The wide window commanded a view of the factory housing estate stretching towards the lake at the foot of the hill. The place now lay bathed in the pink light of early sunset. The waters of the lake gleaming through the trees had a pinkish tone. But across the lake the mountains were deep blue and coils of mist crept along the lakeshore.

Andrei flung open the window, almost upsetting the vase of flowers that stood on the sill.

"Come and look at this. I say, isn't it fine. I'm so glad we can see the mountains from our window."

No reply came from Nikolai. Andrei turned round and saw Nikolai engaged in acrobatics. He stood with his legs in the air, his face red, his neck-veins standing out like cords. With some difficulty he managed to keep his balance; then he sprang back on to his feet.

"I'm a foreman! Think of that, Andrei. Do you know what I am? The foreman of a turnery. That's what Uncle Vasya was. Remember how important he was? That moustache of his? And his fancy waistcoat with the little pockets? Oh, I used to be so scared of him when he came to see Boris Ivanovich. And I'm a foreman like him. Oh no, you can't understand what that means."

He started to tell Andrei how the personnel manager had proposed putting him in the office of the chief technologist ("Do you realize what that would have meant? Sitting at a desk in an office!"), how he had parried the proposal and at once asked to be sent to the first machine shop where the man in charge turned out to be a very likeable chap ("Like your dad, honestly he is") and how he had immediately suggested the turnery.

"It's a splendid place, you'll see," Nikolai went on. "Plenty of new lathes. They came in not long ago. All the workers used to be trainees—fine chaps with advanced theoretical training. And the work is amazingly interesting—in fact, I'm delighted."

Andrei listened somewhat sceptically. Would Nik be able to work on his own as a foreman? Why, he'd be sure to make some silly mistake on the first day. But Nikolai was deeply offended when Andrei voiced these doubts.

"I've got the practical knowledge. I took a course in a factory, didn't I? And after all—I shan't be left on my own. The manager of that shop isn't a chap to leave a man without any help and the instructor-repairer's had a lot of experience. I've already met him. So you needn't worry about me."

But Andrei's qualms were not set at rest. He had met foremen in his life; they used to come and see his father. They were always men well on in life, men whose hair had grown grey over their work. He knew what respect his father held these foremen in—and his father was himself a highly-qualified worker. And now here was Nik, a student only yesterday, a schoolboy the day before, suddenly being given this high calling.

His mind would have been more at ease had Nikolai been put in charge of a small workshop, for instance—after all he was an engineer who had graduated with honours and there was no doubt about his ability. Or if he had been asked to supervise some important designing job or . . . well, there was plenty of work in the factory for a young engineer.

But a foreman! That was going too far. Why, the very name suggested someone who goes in front. And was Nikolai ready to do that yet?

"Your idea of a foreman is out-of-date," Nikolai protested. "You picture him as some old fellow with steel-rimmed spectacles testing a part with his teeth and measuring it with his eye. You only find that sort in the films now."

"What do you mean? At the factory my father works at. . . ."

"Don't compare our factory with the one where Boris Ivanovich works. That's a really old place where there are workers who've been there for fifty years. Why, our place has only been up for a little more than ten years."

"I'm not talking about the buildings. I'm talking about people."

"So am I."

"Then what do you mean by ten years?"

"I mean that your old foreman can't be cut in two and put to work in two factories at once."

The argument went on until someone thumped loudly on the door. Vasya Gorlinka stood there, hot and red-faced, the suitcases and rucksacks at his feet.

"Here are your things," he said.

Nikolai and Andrei stood quite abashed while Vasya dragged the luggage into the room. Then they recovered their wits and, hurrying towards him, took their things and thanked him warmly.

"Why did you fetch them? We'd have gone ourselves. . . ."

They shook Vasya's hand. Vasya smiled, mopped his brow with his sleeve and left.

Andrei and Nikolai went to the window and leaned out. Peering into the deepening twilight, they saw a lorry with a suitcase and a basket in the back. Dusya was perched on the basket. She was leaning over the side of the lorry and talking to another girl. Her loud voice carried all the way up to the fourth floor.

"Dusya," called Andrei. "Thank you. You're our guardian angel."

Dusya looked up, waved to them and shouted something inaudible. At that moment Vasya darted out of the hostel, hopped nimbly on to the lorry which shot off, leaving a trail of dust.

For a long time Andrei and Nikolai gazed after the lorry. The dusk was spilling over the ground, the lake no longer gleamed pink, the mountains had grown quite black, a light breeze stirred the dust on the road and rustled the foliage of the young poplars that had been planted round the Stalingrad building. Lights flashed on in the windows of distant houses.

Beyond the lake appeared a broken chain of lights at the foot of the mountain. There was a village on that side.

Andrei and Nikolai did not feel like staying indoors. They went out. The breeze ruffled the hair on their bare heads. It was a fresh, balmy breeze that swept from the mountains and the lake, bringing a scent of pines and water. It was a breeze that did not belong to the town at all and yet near where the young men stood rose tall buildings with gates shaped like great arches. In front of the houses and in the courtyards that they could see through the arches grew young trees. The trees could not have been in the ground long—they were propped up with stout stakes.

People had not gone to bed yet. The house windows were brightly lit, young people played volley-ball in the yards and the provisions store was crowded with shoppers. The evening breeze brought strains of music from afar. No radio music, this; it sounded like a brass band playing a little unassuredly, stumbling over passages in a well-known tune.

"They're rehearsing, I expect," said Andrei. "Let's walk in the direction of the music and see where it takes us to."

They walked on, passing a group of lads in trainees' uniform; they were mending a seine-net on the porch of one of the houses. Near by, right on the road, some little boys were throwing bats at chocks in the game of *gorodki*. Nikolai leaped out of the way as a bat that someone had hurled just missed him.

He picked up the bat and said:

"You shouldn't play on the road, you might hurt someone."

No sooner had he spoken than he recalled the yard in Moscow where he used to throw just such a bat and the old man who scolded him for playing in the yard. As if there was anywhere else you could play! The old buffer didn't realize that—he was simply afraid of being hit with a bat.

Could he have turned into an old man like that, Nikolai wondered. That was how the boys probably saw him.

And to show what he was really made of, he stopped, took a proper stance and with one throw brought down Grandmother at the Window—one of the most difficult arrangements of the chocks.

"That's the way you ought to throw, instead of trying to hit passers-by."

The boys rushed to rearrange the chocks, Nikolai went over to Andrei who had been watching him with a smile on his face.

"Foreman!" Andrei said with a shrug. "Call yourself a-foreman!"

"A foreman at that game, anyway. Did you see that throw of mine? You try and do it."

The street ended. They had passed the last of the houses and now only the unpaved track stretched broad and hard-trodden ahead of them. Far ahead they could make out an arched gateway in faint outline. Huge dark trees stood against the starlit sky.

"That must be the Park of Culture," Andrei said. "I can hear the music."

Somewhere quite near a trombone brayed. It kept playing the same passage—a few bars. Andrei could clearly imagine the trombone player with his puffed-out cheeks and damp brow.

The gateway turned out to be a high plaster arch. From there a wide shrub-lined path led uphill. Enormous, broad-girthed pines thrust their boughs towards the path, their shaggy tops rising straight into the sky. The park lay in darkness; only in one place, some way ahead, shone a little group of electric lights. It was there that the band was practising.

The band practise was proceeding on an open-air stage facing an amphitheatre full of narrow, backless benches. The benches were empty, except for the front row where the musicians sat holding on their knees instruments in cases and bags.

The trombone player sat alone on the stage. He was a very young trombone player; his cheeks were red as he played the few bars over and over again.

"That'll do," someone called to him from the bench. "It's fine now. Let's go."

But the trombone player kept it up. Now he played the short passage with firm assurance and the sounds came out of his instrument loudly and triumphantly. His cheeks swelled for the last time and finally he lowered the trombone, picked up the music and leaped from the stage.

"Now we can go," he said. "We must put out the lights. Where's the main switch, you chaps?"

"I say, he's in my section, I swear he is," whispered Nikolai. "He's a turner called Vladimir Nazarenko."

Nikolai was delighted to find someone he knew in the park. He felt like coming out of the darkness on to the brightly-lit space but the lights went out, the musicians rose from the bench and started discussing some business of their own that Nikolai did not understand. They were saying that someone had been called but hadn't turned up to the practise, that on Sunday they had to go somewhere to play but that the flutist had broken his flute and had been given a new instrument which did not suit him at all.

"He's got the right to refuse it," said the trumpet player hotly. "Why don't they mend the old one that he's used to?"

The musicians walked away and the park became quiet. Only the murmur of the wind in the tree-tops broke the silence. Suddenly there was a rustle of twigs and a pine cone fell swishing down to the ground. Nikolai and Andrei looked up. Overhead they could see patches of sky beyond the tops of trees. The stars looked much larger than in Moscow.

It was late and he had not yet written his letter to Nina, thought Nikolai. What was Nina doing now? Sleeping probably without giving him a thought. . . .

He glanced at his watch—the gold one that his father had given him. Midnight. The Kremlin chimes would be ringing for the whole world to hear. People would be coming home from the theatre. Mum would be lying in bed reading. . . . And here he was, far from Moscow, with trees all around him and the dark pines dropping their cones on him and a big unfamiliar star blazing quite close to the new moon.

"Haven't you got the feeling that we're a long way from Moscow?" Andrei asked him. "It's midnight here, and there it's only ten o'clock."

"That's true. I'd forgotten about that."

How could he have forgotten it? In other words, Nina was not asleep but busy with something: getting ready for her exams, maybe, or going for a stroll and thinking of him. What sort of a letter ought he to write? Should he tell her about the park, about the star that looked like a bit of the moon, about the lake?

Perhaps it would be better if he wrote only about how much he loved her. About how sorry he was that he had not found the courage to tell her so in Moscow, and how he wished she were here to see all the things he was seeing. But perhaps a letter like that would annoy her, perhaps she wouldn't answer it. Then everything would be over and all his hopes would be dashed. Maybe it would be better to wait until she had dropped one little word that betrayed her feelings and desires.

What, then, if he wrote only about what he had seen in Verkhnyaya Kamenka? Yes, that would be better. He'd tell her that he was a foreman, too. And how he and Andrei remembered Moscow and how he'd mixed up the time, thinking that midnight had come to Moscow two hours too early. She ought to realize that in thinking of Moscow he had thought of her. He might even drop a hint to that effect, only it would have to be a very delicate one, one that wouldn't annoy her.

Then how was he going to start the letter? "My dear Nina" was a bit bold, "Dear Nina" too offhand. And just "Nina" was too abrupt. . . . He worried about this all the way back to the Stalingrad but came to no decision. . . .

Sasha the warden had not gone to bed. He handed Andrei an envelope.

"Vanya Poperechny was here asking for you. He left this. If there's nothing you need I'll go off to bed."

It was cool in the bedroom, for the breeze was blowing in through the open window; over the lake hung the horned moon; a narrow silvery path of light stretched across the dark water.

"Are you going to write?" Andrei asked with a yawn. "I'm not. I'm far too sleepy."

Nikolai wanted to reply that he was certainly going to write but he, too, felt the call of the smooth clean sheets. The long day that had started on the station square was over. He had to sleep, his eyes closed without his being aware of it.

Chapter Five

1

When Stoletov was appointed to Verkhnyaya Kamenka his father-in-law, Ivan Konstantinovich, declared that he would accompany him there.

"If you only knew how much of my life is bound up with those parts," he told his daughter Varya. "The happiest years of my life, all my youth."

"How can you think of it, Dad," Varya exclaimed in alarm. "I won't let you go. You'd better forget about it."

The old man felt hurt. From his arm-chair at the window he silently watched his daughter and son-in-law pack; then he turned his back on them and stared at the top of a poplar that grew beside the house. The tree was

not yet in leaf and through its bare branches a white cloud could be seen floating across the blue early-spring sky.

The old man sat lost in his thoughts. His head, bathed in the light of the setting sun, wore a silvery gleam. His thin hair bristled stiffly above his forehead and his grey scanty brows. His face which had already acquired a deep sunburn, was quite still, as if it had been modeled out of brown clay; his light-blue slightly dulled eyes looked startlingly prominent.

Ivan Konstantinovich was approaching seventy and the figure that was once so strong and muscular had wasted away to become angular and uncertain in its movements. He hobbled rather than walked—he had been lame from childhood—and looked as if he was bound to stumble and fall. But he managed to keep on his feet and liked to take long walks through the town and come home to tell the family proudly about the route he had taken; that route always sounded long and difficult.

The family loved and cherished the old man. They never let him see that they considered him old and feeble. But now, for the first time, he felt old, incapable of doing things for himself as Stepan or Varya did. He wanted to leave with Stepan but he could not—Varya was quite firm about that. And he was in no position to take things into his own hands—he couldn't go, there was nothing to be done but sit at home.

"But think, Daddy dear," said Varya, perching on the arm of his chair. "Do you really want to leave me? I'd be on my own with the children. It's hard enough for me to part with Stepan."

She ran the palm of her hand tenderly over her father's bristly hair and kissed him on the ear as she always used to do when she was a little girl.

She's a sly one, the old man thought. What a way she had of talking him out of something.

He sat on with knitted brows but now he was thinking that perhaps it would really be hard on Varya if he were to leave. Looking after Ivan and Demyan was no joke. Didn't he know how hard it was to get the little wretches to do their homework and keep up to the mark at school.

"Oh, you'll manage the children all right," he said, not giving in yet. "I never asked for any help when I had you on my hands, and you were no angel, I can assure you."

"But I was a little girl, Daddy. If they were girls, I could manage them on my own. But they're boys. Look, as soon as term finishes we'll all go to Stepan together for the holidays. It's only a matter of a few weeks."

That was true. Ivan Konstantinovich was hardly ready for the day of departure when it came along. They ordered a taxi, put the luggage in the boot, and off they went with the old man sitting in front with the driver and Varya and the boys in the back. The yard-woman slammed the door to, the poplar shook its new dress of leaves, the taxi gave a jerk and took them all to the station.

All the time in the train Ivan Konstantinovich looked out of the window. Varya stretched out on the soft upholstered seat—she had had a tiring year and then there had been the packing; the little boys stood all day at the open corridor window with their grandfather who told them some long story that Varya could not catch. Not till evening, when the children had been put to sleep on the upper berths, did the old man sit down beside his daughter.

"Your mother and I brought you this same way forty years ago," he said. "You were only three weeks old then and your mother and I were young and happy and we were going to the place where I'd been given my first job. I had just graduated from the university but nobody in any of the central regions wanted to take me—they maintained I'd been connected with student disturbances. So we decided to go to some distant place where they'd be sure to take me. We chose Verkhnyaya Kamenka. They took me there all right—it was considered a place of exile then."

He patted Varya's hand and lay down on his berth. When she woke up next morning he was up, standing at the window watching the trees sweep past.

Stepan met them at the station. The little boys, excited by the journey, kissed their father and jumped into the car; Varya drew her husband to her, wondering how she could have lived so long without him—her companion in life, the joy of her days, her defender against all harm. How happy she was that they were together. She would have to think of some way of preventing them ever being parted again.

"Drive like the wind," Stoletov said gaily to the driver. "Show our visitors a bit of real driving."

Ivan Konstantinovich sat beside the driver, looking ahead. Behind him the boys were laughing and Stepan was telling Varya something, but the old man felt sad at heart. His life was over. Once upon a time he had been young and full of sap but now he was an old fogey brought to spend the last years of his life with his son-in-law.

Just before they reached Verkhnyaya Kamenka the old man became so agitated that he asked the driver to slow down.

"I remember these parts," he said, "I want to have a look round."

The driver drove slowly and Ivan Konstantinovich, deeply moved, gazed at the line of the mountains, recognizing every slope, at the tiny cottages of the village. They have grown older but they were still the same ones that stood here in his own days.

"Stop the car," he said all of a sudden, touching the driver's elbow. "Please stop here."

The driver braked sharply; Ivan Konstantinovich opened the door and got out on to the road. A small cottage stood in thick verdure a little way back from the road. The garden was fenced by new green-painted railings, a new roof glistened over the dark timbers.

"What is it, Dad?" asked Varya, getting out of the car. "Aren't you feeling well?"

Ivan Konstantinovich did not answer. His face was sad; there was a suspicious glitter in his eye behind the spectacles.

"That's my school..." he muttered. "My school, Varya. Where I used to teach.... And now others live there, somebody else teaches there...."

The old man drew a small Karelian-birch cigarette case out of his pocket, took a cigarette from it, lighted it and got back into the car. And long after the car was running on its smooth course, Ivan Konstantinovich went on gazing back at his school.

"Actually that's not used as a school any more," said the driver, speaking for the first time. "It's used by a kolkhoz as a crèche. There's the school."

He nodded towards a white stone-faced building with broad steps leading up to the entrance, a pillared affair crowned by a pediment. The pillars were stumpy and stout and somewhat offended the laws of architecture, but they gave the place a solid permanent look.

The driver went on talking but Ivan Konstantinovich had closed his eyes and set off on an excursion into the past. He remembered the school, the kerosene lamp over the teacher's desk, the school children wearing felt boots and homespun. He remembered how much he wanted to teach those lads to live finer, more interesting lives.

For some reason he recalled a piercingly cold day with the wind sweeping the snow before it across the road. Convicts were being marched under guard down that road.

He recalled how he and his young wife had run out of doors when they saw the column approaching and had thrust bread and potatoes into the prisoners' hands—everything they could find in the house. The guards tried to keep them away but they knew it was hopeless; for if one was driven away, there was always another running out from the next house.

How long ago that was! It was more like a scene read about in some book in one's youth than something that had really happened.

"Fallen asleep, Dad?" said Varya. "Wake up, we're there."

Ivan Konstantinovich opened his eyes; the car had come to a halt in front of a small, freshly-plastered house. Stepan was getting the luggage out of the boot, the children were already dashing for the porch while the old man struggled out of the car and made his way to a seat on the bench near the gate. Varya and Stepan carried the bags indoors; the boys ran off at once down to the lake; the car drove away. Ivan Konstantinovich remained alone; he looked down the hill-slope and saw among the pines other white houses like the one where Stepan lived.

Why, it was a whole town. And it was just here that he used to come hunting.

It all came back to him. How he would roam on skis over these very slopes, a gun slung over his shoulder. He never used to fire it—it would have been a pity to disturb the solemn silence of the forest in its winter garb. Only once had he fired—he had wounded a hare and it had screamed like a child. Since that time he carried the gun as a pure matter of form: in case he should meet a wolf or some ill-intentioned fellow. But he had never had to use it against either one or the other: the ill-intentioned men sat in warm houses and had to be fought a different way, a way he could not master, with the result that three years later they had forced the young teacher out of Verkhnyaya Kamenka.

He was sorry to leave. It meant breaking with his pupils and with a school house round which he had found time to lay out a young orchard. But he had to shift to another place and take work in a saw-mill where he had spent all the rest of his working life.

Varya came up to her father, kissed the top of his head and helped him to his feet.

"Come indoors and see all the things that Stepan has got ready for us."

There were two rooms in the flat. In both of them—on the tables, the window-sills, the tops of the cupboards—stood vases with huge bunches of wild flowers. Clumsily-hung white net curtains—the work of a man, that was clear—billowed at the windows. There was something very clean,

fresh, and new about these rooms with their smell of fresh paint and of timber that had not been long from the saw.

"I've only two rooms now," said Stoletov, "but they'll give me another if the family stays for the winter. I think we can manage with two for the summer."

"We'll manage," said Ivan Konstantinovich. "And as for the winter I'll gladly stay if Varya agrees."

"We won't talk about the winter today," said Varya. "We'd better settle in and unpack and then have dinner. Are you going to work today, Stepan?"

"Yes, for a little," Stoletov replied guiltily. "I hope you don't mind but I really must go."

"I don't mind, dear."

Varya saw her husband to the gate and stood for a long time watching him as he walked down the hill—a short, stalwart figure who for her was the best, most beloved man alive.

"Mummy," came a child's voice behind her. "We're looking for you."

It was Ivan. He was on the porch leaning on a long twisted staff.

"We've seen everything. We've been down to the lake and we've been to the top of the hill. You can see everything all round up there. Look at the stick I found. I took it, I don't think it belongs to anybody."

He sat down on the porch and at once set about burning his initials I. S. on the staff with a magnifying glass.

"Do you like this place?" asked his mother.

"I love it. And so do Demyan and Grandad. We're never going away from here."

He looked searchingly at his mother. What would she say? But Varya said nothing. She ran her hand along the railings of the porch and with a pensive look went indoors.

No sooner had she closed the door behind her than there came a piercing whistle from behind the garden fence and Demyan appeared at the gate with a stranger, another little boy.

"Ivan. Come and catch crayfish. He says there's one under every stone."

"We ought to ask Mummy . . ." Ivan said hesitantly.

"Oh, we won't be long. It's just down at the lake."

"Well, if it's not for long. . . ." Ivan put his burning-glass in his pocket, leaned the staff against the wall and ran to the gate.

The three little boys hurried down the path, parting the broad leaves of the alder bushes before them. The setting sun cast a red light on their backs. The lake gleamed still and lovely in the gaps in the wood. An inexplicable sense of joy seized the boys who found no other way of giving it vent than to shout at the top of their voices. The distant woods returned a happy echo.

Stoletov was home late. The children were asleep. There were piles of freshly-cut sticks beside their beds; under the beds crayfish scraped and scratched in little baskets of twisted withes; on the window-sill stood a jam-jar in which minnows stirred; a beetle buzzed in a match-box. Sleep had overcome the little boys suddenly—on the table remained unsorted a pile of stones and heaps of leaves and flowers intended for a herbarium.

Stoletov stood beside the beds and looked down at his sons. They lay there with their scratched arms flung wide apart and even in their sleep their faces continued to wear a preoccupied expression. They looked very

much alike, these two sun-burned, freckled little boys asleep under their father's roof.

Oh, how glad he was to have them with him, his eagles, thought Stoletov. Eagles! He smiled at the thought but it was a smile of infinite tenderness.

A few days later Ivan Konstantinovich came to see Stoletov at the factory. The old man had shaved carefully and wore a white jacket that he put on only for special occasions; his boots shone and emitted a strong odour of polish. He walked into Stoletov's office, looking clearly agitated, and told him that he wanted to speak to him not as to a son-in-law but as to the head of the Party organization of the factory; that was why he preferred to speak in the office than at home.

"I want to state right away, Stepan Demyanovich, that I do not intend to live here as if I were on holiday. I intend to work and I am asking you to provide me with the possibility of doing so."

Ivan Konstantinovich's relations with Stoletov were of a peculiar character. The two had met many years ago at a time when Ivan Konstantinovich worked as a teacher at a railway school and Stepan as a fitter in the sheds. One day the secretary of the Comsomol organization took Stepan to the school, a large building surrounded by trees and shrubs, poplars and thick lilac bushes. In the yard—it was more like an orchard than a yard—limped a man whose face was tanned dark by the sun. He was walking along a hard-rolled yellow sand path, watching two lads watering bushes that bent under the weight of bright red roses.

"Good morning, Ivan Konstantinovich," said the Comsomol secretary. "I've brought you one of our chaps. I'd like him to meet you. You can help him. He's a bright lad, a fitter, but hasn't had much schooling. Couldn't you teach him?"

The Comsomol secretary's voice was full of entreaty and Stepan, who had never known him show the slightest fear of anyone, had heard him demand but never beg, grew nervous and stood aside.

"Teach him?" echoed Ivan Konstantinovich. "I can't do that. We don't take lamp-posts like him in the school."

"It's not schooling he wants. He wants to go to college. But he's not ready for the entrance exams. Talk to him, Ivan Konstantinovich. You'll see for yourself that the lad's no fool."

"As if that means anything. There aren't so many fools in the world, you know. Fools are exceptional. All right, I'll talk to him and see what we can make of him."

While they were talking, Stepan looked round. The two lads went on watering the rose bushes. Several little boys were weeding a border. On the porch sat a thin girl with large eyes and a wide mouth. She had some needlework in her hand; and although she kept her head bent over it, Stepan had an impression that her eyes were following his every move.

The girl was wearing a white frock; her hair was braided in plaits, and between her brows her high forehead was wrinkled with concentration. Everything about her had an air of frailty; her bare, sun-burned legs, her sharp-elbowed arms, her long neck. To Stepan she looked altogether too thin and skimpy.

The girl suddenly threw her needlework down, picked up two buckets full to the brim with water and carried them away with the greatest of ease,

without spilling a drop. She passed out of sight indoors with not even a peek at Stepan. A few moments later the sounds of music burst into the garden through the wide-open windows. Yes, they burst, not floated or wafted, these powerful challenging sounds so full of bidding, of reproach even—like a storm, like thunder.

Stepan glanced at the Comsomol secretary; he was still walking up and down the path with Ivan Konstantinovich, deep in conversation. Was he really indifferent to that music? Wasn't he interested to know who was playing? Stepan was. He walked over to the window, drew the curtain aside and looked in. At the piano sat that lanky-legged girl.

"All right, I'll leave you here," he heard the Comsomol secretary say to him. "You have a talk with Ivan Konstantinovich right away."

Stepan started back from the window. Ivan Konstantinovich gave him a rather cold look and asked him not into the house but to an arbour where newspapers and books lay on a table and the walls were hung with a collection of leaves gummed to sheets of paper, and on a stool in a corner stood a huge bunch of daisies and bluebells.

"Sit down and let's have a proper exam."

An hour later Stepan left the garden without having had another chance of seeing the girl. He felt excited and confused—apparently everything that he had learned at school had been stored somewhere in the back of his mind and had come out the moment Ivan Konstantinovich began questioning him.

"H'm, I can see that head of yours is quite retentive," Ivan Konstantinovich had said. "We'll see how it will develop later. Take these books. Prepare up to this point by tomorrow morning. If there's anything you don't understand, I'll explain it to you. But try to understand as much as you can for yourself. My time is valuable, I'm not going to waste it on lazybones."

Back in the hostel, Stepan found that he could not open his textbook as he had intended. He lay on his bed, slipped the book under the pillow and shut his eyes. At once his ears were filled with the thunder of that music, challenging, mighty, threatening. Never before had he heard such music. It was like an introduction to a new life. What kind of life? A difficult one, no doubt, but interesting and—the main thing—unknown. Would he make demands on life, or would life itself make the demands? Probably both. Well, let it be that way. If life demanded he would be ready with his reply, and he himself would demand of life all it had to give.

The music thundered on, but no one but he heard it. Everyone else in the dormitory was asleep, not realizing that a great event was taking place. They slept, unmindful of the approaching dawn, of the first glistening rays of the rising sun at the windows, by whose light young eyes could easily make out the letters in the textbooks.

Two years later, when Stepan left to take the college entrance exams, Ivan Konstantinovich's daughter Varya went to see him off. She wore a large shawl and a loose overcoat and no longer looked so thin as that first time.

They said good-bye to each other. Stepan stood near the door of the railway carriage holding Varya's hand; he was blushing and tongue-tied. He could not find the words to tell her that he hated to leave her, that he would still have been spending his evenings at the school if Ivan Konstantinovich had not told him that he was quite ready to take the exams.

"Don't waste time. Be off with you. I've plenty of other work to do and you're not the only one in the world," he had told Stepan.

"Don't worry," said Varya. "You'll pass. You'll be an engineer."

"I'm not worrying. What makes you think so?"

"There's something in your look. Something frightened."

"It's something else that worries me. . . ."

"What's that?"

He could not lie to Varya. She always guessed whether he was telling the truth or not.

"I'm afraid you'll forget me at once. You're at the Conservatoire. You're gifted. And I? We have walked together across the fields and through the woods but the winter will come and our path will be covered with frost. . . ."

"Don't be silly. Nothing's going to get frosted over. At the end of the holidays I'll be coming to town too. We'll meet. You just see that you get into the college."

He passed his exams. He and Varya met. Their friendship did not grow chill. They married while they were still students, and when they had graduated Varya started to teach at a musical school and Stepan entered the designing office of a factory.

Then came the children—twin boys. They called them Ivan and Demyan after their grandfathers. And all that—his work, his meeting Varya, and the many successful and joyous moments in his life—Stoletov considered he owed to some extent to Ivan Konstantinovich. He felt grateful to him and always tried to meet his every wish, to help him in every way, to smooth out his difficulties. Now, too, when the old man had come to him asking for work, he longed to gratify his wish. But what could he offer him? He was too old for school work—he was hard of hearing and his voice was not loud enough for him to be able to assert his authority; how could he be expected to keep the children in order when they gathered in the classroom and started making a row and fooling around? In any case, the school was closed for the holidays and Ivan Konstantinovich was unwilling to wait for work till the autumn.

"Don't think I've come to you without thinking it all over," said the old man. "I know very well it's not easy to fix an old fungus like me in a job. But I'm not asking any favours. I've got my place in life—I'm an old-age pensioner and your relative, I'm not asking for any position, it's the work I need. Surely I'm not quite useless?"

There was something childishly pathetic in the old man's eyes and Stoletov had to look down so that Ivan Konstantinovich should not see that he had noticed it.

"Useless? What are you talking about? You can be very useful," Stoletov said firmly. "Do you think you could take on some coaching at the evening school?"

"I could," Ivan Konstantinovich replied without demur.

Stoletov picked up the telephone and rang up somebody; a few minutes later an elderly man with a reddish beard entered the office.

"I'd like you to meet each other," said Stoletov, rising. "This is Vasili Nikitich. Vasili Nikitich is the director of the evening school for young workers. He's also in charge of cultural work in the factory. And this is Ivan Konstantinovich, a retired school-teacher."

Stoletov explained to Vasili Nikitich why he had sent for him. Could

he use Ivan Konstantinovich during the summer for coaching those young people who were a bit behindhand in their studies?

"Of course I can. When can he start?"

"Tomorrow, if you like," said Ivan Konstantinovich excitedly. "Or this evening."

"That's splendid. I'm delighted to hear it. May we use your office for a while, Stepan Demyanovich? If so we can go into everything without losing any time."

Stoletov cleared the newspapers off a small round table, placed it near the window and brought up chairs for Vasili Nikitich and the old man. Vasili Nikitich took out of his pocket a list of pupils, drawing Ivan Konstantinovich's attention to the case of one foundry worker who had postponed taking his exams till the autumn. Stoletov saw that the talk was well launched and turned back to his own affairs.

But before he was able to make a start on the minutes of the last meeting of the bureau, the sound of the hooter came from the depth of the factory yard. The sound floated away to a great height under the blue sunlit sky; a deep resonant powerful sound which echoed far away in the mountains and carried over the lake and the pine forest.

Stoletov enjoyed that sound. What a superb voice!

The moment the hooter went, the yard began to fill with people. The broad asphalted alleys between the shops were no longer to be seen; the saplings that lined these alleys—none of them the height of a man—were now concealed. The workers moved in a dense throng as in a May Day demonstration; a lorry that happened to meet them protested in vain with piercing plaintive sounds of its horn.

Stoletov enjoyed this dinner-break at the factory perhaps more than any other part of the day. It was a time when the small building of the Party bureau had many visitors. At the typist's table the secretaries of workshop organizations ran their eyes over the typed minutes and resolutions taken at their meetings. Propagandists collected material for their evening work. The padded door banged every minute to the acute annoyance of Maria Voronkova, the office secretary, who was driven to removing the spring and opening the door wide.

During the dinner-break no meetings or conferences took place in Stoletov's office. People dropped in simply to talk over their affairs and to meet each other and rest. This was an innovation of Stoletov's. He always tried to be in at that hour, kept himself free from business meetings and long interviews. "The hour of the open door" is what one young engineer light-heartedly called the dinner-break in the Party bureau. Maria Voronkova was deeply offended.

"As if the Party bureau door is ever closed," she protested. "People come in and out the whole day long, sometimes quite unnecessarily, and you talk about an 'hour.'"

But Stoletov liked the phrase; actually he did leave his office door wide open during the dinner-break; the draught carried off the tobacco smoke.

When he heard the hooter blow, Stoletov glanced at the two men sitting in the corner and said:

"There'll be a good many people coming in here in a minute or two. Won't they disturb you? Perhaps you'd like to move into the Party reading-room?"

"They won't disturb us," said Vasili Nikitich. "On the contrary, I'll introduce Ivan Konstantinovich to one of his future pupils. He'll probably drop in. Half the factory comes here during the dinner-hour."

And so it was. The hooter had hardly stopped when into the office burst a young draughtsman carrying a large cardboard tube. "It's finished, Stepan Demyanovich," he shouted from the door. "Look how it's come out."

He slipped a map out of the tube, unrolled it and held it up, concealing himself from head to foot. It was a map of the entire Soviet Union; in the centre was Verkhnyaya Kamenka. From Verkhnyaya Kamenka arrows pointed in all directions; some pointed to towns, others to factory settlements, and others to the coast of the Baltic and the Pacific. The longest arrow of all stretched westward from Verkhnyaya Kamenka to the Soviet frontiers, to continue to an unknown destination.

The map was coloured; green for the forests, blue for the seas and rivers, and brown for the mountain ranges. The republican capitals were marked by red stars; Moscow by a gold star and the arrows were painted bright blue.

"Splendid," said Stoletov. "There's good work for you. Let's have it up on the wall."

He clambered on to a chair; the draughtsman handed him a box of drawing-pins and soon the map covered the entire wall.

"Afternoon all," said Syurtukov as he came in. "What sort of geography's that?"

"Special sort of geography," said Stoletov, glancing over his shoulder. "The map shows the places our work goes to. Quite a sphere of influence, eh?"

He pressed down the last drawing-pin and jumped down. One after another people came in and stopped short in front of the map. They examined it carefully, praised the work of the draughtsmen and asked questions about every arrow marked on it. In the corner Ivan Konstantinovich and Vasili Nikitich went on talking quietly and keeping an ear open for what was going on in the office. The old man looked happy: at last he had broken out of his hermit's cell; he was seeing real people and hearing interesting talk.

"Who's he?" he would ask Vasili Nikitich every time a new face appeared. "And that fellow?" And he sat with his ear cupped in his hand nodding, as Vasili Nikitich told him about everyone. He liked the look of everybody but specially of Syurtukov who at once insisted that the map be hung in the first machine shop.

"Whatever you say, it's the best shop. We're still in the lead."

"Bragging, eh?" It was Lepikhin's merry voice. "You wait. You'll not be in the lead for long."

Vasili Nikitich nudged the old man.

"That's one of your future pupils," he whispered.

Lepikhin was not alone; several other men followed him into the office. All of them were equally dark in the face: as if they had been powdered by sand in the moulding process, or scorched by molten metal.

Judging from the way the foundrymen sat down with Lepikhin and listened to his words, Ivan Konstantinovich saw that his future pupil enjoyed the affection and respect of his comrades.

Vasili Nikitich told him that Lepikhin was the best moulder in the factory, that he had commanded a battery during the war and had been considered one of the bravest officers in his artillery regiment. Severely

wounded, Lepikhin was sent to a base hospital in a town far from the front. There he recovered and eventually married. His wife was a physician and when Lepikhin started to work at the factory she joined the staff of the factory hospital. Lepikhin learned his trade quickly but it was his dream to study the theory of metallurgy, to enter college and become a mechanical engineer. He lacked secondary education, however, and so this ex-officer, Party secretary and married man had to go back to school and sit at a desk with youngsters who were just out of their apprenticeship.

Even now he was carrying a school copy-book rolled up in a tube. Syurtukov noticed it at once.

"Still at it?" he joked. "Well, keep it up, it's good for you. I hear you mean to win a gold medal at school."

"I wouldn't turn up my nose at a silver one. I'll take what comes."

"And what then? Good-bye to the factory, good-bye to your job, I suppose. You'll be off to college. Well, it's the only thing you can do. With an educated wife like yours you'll have to study to keep up with her."

"I'll go to college all right," retorted Lepikhin. He ignored the reference to his wife. "But I don't intend to leave the factory. You'll have to put up with me."

Lepikhin spoke with a smile, but actually he found studying no easy task. There were books to be pored over at night, there were pressing demands of everyday life to be met. To be at the same time a leading worker in the factory, a Party secretary and one of the best pupils in his evening class cost him a considerable effort.

Stoletov had often promised to relieve him of some of his work but kept putting off doing anything about it: as it was, the shop was not working at all well, and without Lepikhin as secretary things would go from bad to worse.

But now, as he listened to Lepikhin's light-hearted banter with Syurtukov, Stoletov recalled his promises. He really ought to do something about it. Lepikhin would be going to college in the autumn—he'd have to be freed from Party work then. But during the summer he would have to keep it up. What he really needed was some help with his studies and that was what Ivan Konstantinovich was going to give him. . . .

"Everybody's studying," said Syurtukov. "I'm not against it, mind you. Knowledge is a useful thing, especially for youngsters. But what surprises me is the way our young fellows in the factory change their trades. Some want to be geologists, others teachers—they seem to be unveiling ever new talents in themselves. But I became a fitter when I was thirteen and have stuck to it ever since."

"A man needs work according to his vocation," said a young draughtsman from a corner where he had found a modest place. "That's what will happen one day. Under Communism."

"What you mean is that if we had Communism now you would stop drawing blue prints in a factory and sit somewhere painting pictures. Isn't that it?" asked Stoletov. "But what use would those pictures be?"

The draughtsman's boyish face blushed. Before he had time to reply, Syurtukov broke in:

"A man needs higher education to improve his knowledge of his trade. A young fellow starts to work as a fitter, say. All right. He studies while he works; he improves his knowledge of his trade, gets a diploma, becomes a man with higher education. But then take Nazarenko: nothing wrong with

him as a fitter, he could learn to become a fully qualified one if he liked, but instead of that he falls in love with his trombone and dreams of playing in the band."

"Why shouldn't he?" said Lepikhin. "We've quite a number of people with higher education here—foremen, lab workers and so on. But each works his own way. If a man has a bent for his job he'll work creatively. But if he just happened to get to a technical college because he failed to get into the one he wanted or because he started to work at that particular trade as a lad, then he'll not get much out of it. It's all just part of the day's work to him. Look at you. You're what might be called an average fitter," Lepikhin went on. "You haven't reached the top qualification grades. It's not because you only went to school for three years, not at all, is it? We have fitters who've had no better education than that, but who pour rationalization suggestions into workers' invention offices. They're men who think about their work every spare minute; they read only technical literature; and come Sunday they call on each other and sit over their tea and there they are talking shop again. And what about you? Every holiday you're off to the forest. Every free minute you're cleaning your gun or training your dog. What you like to talk about more than anything else is hunting and whether it's best to fish with a fly or a worm. If you were living under Communism you wouldn't stay a fitter for more than the time it takes to blink an eyelash."

"And what do you think I'd be doing instead?"

"Damned if I know. Maybe you'd be breeding silver fox. Or beavers. You'd be a zoologist and live in a preserve, racking your brains for a way of taming wolves."

"So you won't let the first shop have the map, Stepan Demyanovich," asked Syurtukov. "E-eh, you're growing mean, chief, keeping everything for yourself."

"The map's for the club. It'll be hung up there."

"Who goes to the club? Specially summer time. Let's have it if only for a bit. Nothing doing? Then I'm off."

"Now Lepikhin will go, too," said Vasili Nikitich, glancing at his watch. "The dinner break's nearly over. Let's have a word with him before he leaves."

He went over to Lepikhin and spoke quietly to him for a moment. Lepikhin rose from the sofa at once.

"This is your teacher," Vasili Nikitich said as he led him up to the old man. "Meet him and make your arrangements."

Ivan Konstantinovich shook hands with his future pupil and told him that he fully shared his views on the harmony between a man's job and his vocation. And it was true that things went wrong when that harmony did not exist, that was true in all walks of life.

The old man was glad to be able to state his opinion on the question under discussion. He would much have liked to join in the discussion at the time it was going on but felt shy; now that he was on his own with his pupil he felt more at ease.

"I'm very glad that we agree," said Lepikhin. "May I come to see you this evening? We'll talk everything over and you can examine me."

"That would suit me very well," said the old man. "Till later, then."

Lepikhin left the office; through the window Ivan Konstantinovich watched him cross the yard which was now crowded and noisy again. A

team of volley-ball players dressed in shorts and singlets, their overalls over their arms, ran past. A number of girls who had been watering a small flower bed near the path to the shops put their buckets against the wall and hurried after the volley-ball players. The hooter sounded again, clearing the yard as the doors to the shops swallowed everybody and only a few late-comers were left clumping noisily on the asphalt.

"Well, I'll leave you, Stepan," said Ivan Konstantinovich. "There's something I must do."

He went out looking happy and preoccupied. The hot noon sun stood directly over the factory. Sunlight poured into Stoletov's office and he had to let down a linen blind. He was turning over in his mind the things that had been said in his office that dinner-hour and failed to hear a light tapping on the door. A moment or two later the knock was repeated, this time more insistently.

"Who's that? Come in."

The door opened. Andrei Korolev stood there.

"I would like your advice on something, Stepan Demyanovich," Andrei said. "Have you a moment?"

"Of course. Now, what is it?"

"It's about some letters that I came across when I was sorting my files. They're from various people but they're all about the invention of engineer Kovalev. They've never been published, although in my opinion they raise big and important questions. Here they are. Perhaps you'll have time to read them."

"I'll be most interested to. Leave them with me and we'll have a talk about them tomorrow."

He glanced through the letters. One of them was neatly written and contained a small sketch done in Indian ink—clearly the work of somebody in the designing office. There were some scrawled lines in pencil signed "Sidorenko, a navvy taking part in the test." Some letters were from the assemblers of the prototype—a whole package of indignant and pressing demands. People had not forgotten Kovalev's machine, it seemed. It had been forgotten only in the head office where Stoletov's enquiry had been lying for some time unanswered.

Nikolai Mikhailovich Zhukov had not replied and Stoletov had not mentioned the machine to Kovalev again; he sensed, however, that when they met, Kovalev looked at him piercingly and with something like mockery in his eyes.

Kovalev probably thought that he had forgotten his promise. How long ago had he made that promise? The weeks had slipped by unnoticed.

2

Stoletov really had not noticed the passage of time. The days slipped by so fast that there was always something left unfinished, some plan unfulfilled, some promise unredeemed. For instance, there was that promise he had made Andrei Korolev to read those letters immediately; that had not been kept. He was called to the regional committee of the Communist Party and did not even have time to telephone to the editorial office.

At the offices of the regional committee the instructor laid before Stoletov a wad of papers fixed together with a paper clip.

"Read this through carefully and say what you think of it."

Stoletov glanced at the top sheet and at once recognized Chumov's report. It had been retyped and it was clear that few had read this copy, for its pages were clean and the edges were not dog-eared. The contents of the report, however, had not changed—all the old material was there, the only addition being a few lines at the end to the effect that all these offences and crimes had been reported to the Communist Party bureau but that Stoletov, the Party organizer sent by the Central Committee, had neither gone into the matter nor punished the offenders, but had discharged the one who fought for the truth to be revealed.

"I know all about this," said Stoletov, pushing the report aside. "We went into the matter at a meeting and considered the report to be foul slander on honest people."

"But some of the facts are true, of that we are convinced," said the instructor. "Why then did the Party bureau not take any measures?"

"Because those facts have not the slightest significance in the lives of the people concerned," snapped Stoletov.

"But a fact is a fact. It has to be analysed and weighed up. Since you did not do it at the meeting, please be so good as to write your opinion on all the points I have marked."

He handed Stoletov some paper and waved him to a chair at the desk and then left the office saying that he would return in half an hour. Stoletov angrily took the clip off the papers and, trying to keep his rising indignation under control, started to write. What damned nonsense it all was. Some petty, spiteful individual writes poisonous filth about everybody around him and then, if you please, one has to vindicate them. There was something wrong about that. Intriguers ought to be made to justify their accusations, they ought to have to prove their charges to the hilt and not oblige busy and entirely innocent people to prove their own innocence.

Stoletov rapidly wrote a brief statement that covered everything that had been said at the meeting and that he knew for himself about those people whom Chumov had tried to smear. They were decent honest people and he found it easy and pleasant to write about them. What he found more difficult to do was to explain why he had taken no notice of Chumov's warnings and had thus, as Chumov asserted, shown a lack of political vigilance. In the end he wrote nothing about himself other than the fact that Chumov's report had been taken into consideration by the bureau and that consequently a resolution was passed unanimously to discharge Chumov.

The job done, Stoletov sat drumming his fingers impatiently on the desk. Over half-an-hour had passed but there were no signs of the instructor. What should he do? Go on waiting endlessly? No, he would leave his statement and start for home as quickly as possible.

But he was unable to leave at once: in the corridor he met the comrade in charge of the industrial department, who drew him into his office to talk over various business matters. This comrade was himself an engineer-designer; he knew the Verkhnyaya Kamenka factory excellently, and the conversation ran along interesting and pleasant lines so that when Stoletov at last left the Party offices he felt calm and content. Of course, it was unpleasant that people like Chumov existed but there were not many of them and they could be dealt with.

Outside it was stifling; the pavements and houses gave off a sweltering

heat, the air was foul with dust and petrol fumes; Stoletov relished the thought of returning to Verkhnyaya Kamenka.

"Home," he said to the driver. "We must get back while it's light so that we can have a swim."

"I saw our editor here, by the way," said the driver. "There he is at the bus stop."

Andrei was standing near a signboard with the words "Verkhnyaya Kamenka" on it. Stoletov at once noticed that he looked tired, affected by the heat, no doubt. Andrei stood leaning against the signboard, fanning his face with a newspaper. When the car braked and stopped beside him he was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he did not pay any attention to it.

"Going back?" Stoletov called and opened the door. "Get in if you are. That's our destination."

Andrei showed neither surprise nor pleasure at seeing Stoletov; he nodded silently and got into the back of the car.

"Where've you been?" Stoletov asked as they moved off. "Have you been in town long?"

"I came in this morning. On the first bus," Andrei spoke reluctantly. "I called at the offices of the regional paper. I was at the Party offices, too, in the press department."

Andrei spoke in an unusually dry, terse manner and, turning round, Stoletov saw that his face was glum and dark.

"What's the matter with you, old man? Not feeling ill, are you? You don't look yourself," he said solicitously.

In the same grudging tone Andrei replied that there was nothing the matter with him except that he felt tired after his day in town. Stoletov shook his head sceptically, turned round again and went on looking through the wind-screen.

They were still driving through the town, climbing a street which wound up to the top of a hill. There the houses were small and tilted against the slope; higher up rose the tower of the weather station or, as it was known locally, the observatory. The blinding sun struck the travellers straight in the face, the wind brought a fine yellow dust from the mountains.

Stoletov glanced at Andrei again. He had not moved; his eyes were shut and his face looked heavy and weary. But there was something more than fatigue wrong with him.

"Stop a minute."

Stoletov moved into the back of the car, and let the windows down on both sides; the wind came in with a whine. Laying a hand on Andrei's knee, Stoletov said peremptorily:

"Tell me what on earth's the matter?"

"It's an unpleasant business," said Andrei, averting his eyes. "Somebody suspected that I had not told the truth about myself, that I'd concealed something in the details I gave of my life. I had to go to the Party offices to write a statement explaining—well, proving that I am what I am. It's the first time anything like that has ever happened to me."

Stoletov recognized in Andrei's voice the indignation that he had felt himself in the Party offices. It was with deliberate calm that he replied.

"Forget it. You've replied—all right. There's nothing to get angry about. Some petty fellow who's suffocating with envy must have written it."

"But why do they believe a letter like that?"

"Oh, come now, it's not a question of believing it. If they'd believed it they would have taken different measures. They wouldn't have asked your advice on the matter."

"But why should I have to explain myself? Why should I be regarded with such insulting suspicion? It's not that wretched denunciation I'm so annoyed about but the fact that I have to vindicate myself."

"There are things in life more unpleasant than that," said Stoletov with a smile. "One has to reserve one's forces to deal with them. You've made your statement—all right, forget about it."

Andrei said nothing; he turned his head to the window and let the wind cool his face. His eyes were empty; he did not see how the streets they drove along had grown wider, how the houses made way for market-gardens and vacant plots of land and potato fields. In the distance rose the dark slopes of the mountain range.

The mountains rushed irresistibly to meet them. The road appeared to be about to plunge into a tunnel piercing their sides but it took a sudden turn, nestled up to the foot of the mountain and ran alongside it. Then it entered a zone of shadow rustling with the dense foliage of the birch trees. The driver took off his cap and mopped his damp brow.

"It's fine here, Stepan Demyanovich," he said, glancing over his shoulder. "Better than being in town, eh? See how the car's going—like a bird."

Stoletov smiled and nodded: it was fine and the car was certainly flying along. He called Andrei's attention to a clear, swift-flowing mountain stream which splashed down from the mountains among the boulders, roared under a bridge and reappeared on the other side of the road.

"That's the Kamenka. Pretty, isn't it?"

But Andrei had no eyes for the Kamenka. To hell with the stream, with all this beauty which now left him quite unmoved. What he would like to have done now was something quite different: he felt like knocking the block off the fellow who had had the nerve to slander him. The denunciation that he had had to reply to was type-written and bore no signature. Who could be the author of all those rotten charges? "Used influence to get the job." "Got into the Party by accident." "Some doubts whether he graduated at the University." "Obscure origin". . . His fist wouldn't take long to clear up the "obscurity" of his origin in that fellow's head.

It was all right for Stoletov placidly to admire the Kamenka and discuss the points of the car with the driver—nobody ever asked him for explanations, nobody smeared his reputation. But he, Andrei, had been smeared all right—and not only by the author of that scabby little note but by the press department worker who had made him write his statement out again, saying that swear words were out of place in a document of that nature. . . .

Yes, he would demand to be told the name of the slanderer. He would demand that the fellow be held responsible for his words. He would see that he was expelled from the Communist Party, put on trial so that no decent person would ever speak to him again. He was not going to let the fellow get away with it and go on pouring out his foul lies.

Andrei's thoughts ran on about the way he would deal with his slanderer; everything would be cleared up and the discomfited press department worker would have to tear up Andrei's statement as unnecessary.

He felt his anger subsiding; his eyes fell on a tall pine with a straight pinkish trunk, motionless on the mountain slope; beyond it reared a huge boulder fretted by the wind and then the scrub stretched on, a blur of green in the shimmer of heat.

The car lost speed—the driver, obviously, wanted to take his time over the stretch between the mountain and the valley where it was cool and shady. But relief was short-lived: a bus overtook them, leaving a trail of dust and petrol fumes.

"Should we stop for a bit?" the driver asked Stoletov, applying the brakes. "I can't drive through all this dust and stink."

He drew the car into the side of the road near a bridge over a narrow stream. The waters dashed along fussily, carrying whirling scraps of wood, splashing against the supports of the bridge, but the moment they reached the meadow they were lost in the tall grass and transformed into a quiet unnoticed brook.

The dust had settled long ago, the petrol fumes had been wafted away, but the travellers had no desire to resume their journey. Andrei ran down to the stream and swilled his face—the water was ice-cold and made his fingers ache at once. The driver strolled up to the car and began to dust it. Stoletov watched them both with a smile—how they were enjoying this halt in the shade, trying to prolong it by finding things to do.

"Well," he said to the driver. "Thinking of waiting for the next bus? They run to time, don't they?"

"It's up to you," grumbled the driver as he sat at the wheel. "You're the boss."

Stoletov called Andrei who sprang back from the stream to the road in a single bound. His face glowed from the icy water, his eyes were merry; he looked as if he had found out something interesting, something that had resolved his doubts.

"I think I'm beginning to know who wrote that tripe about me," he said when the car was running again. "It must have been your ex-editor. Vanya Poperechny warned me that Chumov would take his revenge and that's what he's trying to do. Influence! The ass, I could have got a job in Moscow if I'd wanted without anybody's influence. But Chumov could easily find himself in a real fix: what right had he to sit on those letters about Kovalev's invention? There you had people writing seriously to the paper for help but he didn't help them, oh no, he harmed them—he tried to scare the writers of those letters by alluding to some higher authorities who for some reason considered the invention to be no good."

"That was true, as a matter of fact," said Stoletov. "But whether these 'higher authorities' were right is a question I'm not at all sure about."

"So you've read the letters?" Andrei asked eagerly. "Don't you agree that they pose the question the right way?"

"I must say that I haven't read the letters carefully yet. But I know about Kovalev's invention and I'm of the opinion that it's worth having a row about. Chumov had the opposite opinion—for three reasons. First, because he's a man who knows absolutely nothing about machinery and is quite incapable of appreciating the good points of the invention; second, because he considers that to start a row with higher authorities is a vexatious and risky business—why stick your neck out?—and third,

because he was on very bad terms with Kovalev and didn't intend to do anything to help him."

"Have I your blessing in a row with those higher authorities?"

"You have," Stoletov smiled. "Especially as I've already started it though not energetically enough. If the *Tribuna* will help me I'll be delighted."

"Are you satisfied with the paper now?"

Stoletov had not expected this question. He felt at a momentary loss for words. Was he satisfied with Andrei's work? On the whole, yes. The paper had stopped printing articles with vague hints at criminal offences committed by somebody or other; people did not come any more to complain that they had been slandered. Stoletov had found his work easier since Andrei's arrival at the factory. But could that be considered a criterion for judging the work of the paper?

"Am I satisfied?" he answered. "So far, yes. I consider you've made a good start. But I expect more from you, I expect the paper to become one of the most militant assistants of the Party bureau. We badly need such a helper and the sooner we get it the better."

"And so far the paper doesn't give you that sort of help. Is that your view?"

"It doesn't hinder us and I'm grateful for that," said Stoletov frankly. "Until you came it was a real hindrance."

"That's a pretty stiff verdict, but it's a just one. I feel, too, that what I'm doing is not very important. Just the usual leading article on a general topic, short items, a feature supplied by the press bureau. . . . It looks all right but it's dull reading."

"It'll remain dull until the paper starts making a real campaign for something. For a matter of principle, of course, not on some petty squabble. Now, if you take up the cudgels on behalf of Kovalev's invention, it'll be something serious; you'll have tough opposition and some good allies, too. As soon as we get back we'll go over those letters you brought. Besides, I've some other documents to show you. As a general principle, by the way, we ought to pay more attention to the inventors among our factory workers—they're an interesting, restless lot, you know. But not everybody is able to put up a real fight for his invention—a man gets pushed aside, worn out by all the various tests and investigations; often, promises are made only to be broken and it's quite natural that a man turns sour and drops the fight for something useful. That's where we ought to come in and help him with our support, encourage him and draw him out of his shell."

"But we can't just publish general articles on the subject. We need concrete facts."

"Of course we do. And, moreover, I think those facts can be found. All you need is to make more demands on yourself and on other people, too. You wait until some glaring example of a survival of capitalism crops up, but you overlook the fact that envy and greed and complacency and other vices unworthy of man may be found in someone who at first sight seems to be a good fellow. Such a fellow thinks he's an example of all the Communist virtues but if you take a good look at him you'll see things about him that are far from pleasant. It's our job, too, to help him to see his faults and get rid of them. . . . That's particularly important here at Verkhnyaya Kamenka because our people belong to the younger gen-

eration. They're still in the formative process and anything may come out of them."

"That's just the point—anything," the driver broke in. "Take our garage, for instance, my place of work, so to speak. All the drivers are young except for one or two old hands like me. D'you think those youngsters work properly? Not on your life! They're scroungers of the first water. All they're on the look-out for is a chance of driving in to town so they make a bit on the side doing taxi work. When one of those beauties comes back his car rattles like an old can; he's got a pocketful of the ready and half a litre waiting to be downed. D'you think he realizes that a car is Socialist property? that it's something that needs to be looked after? Not he! Now, if the paper would go for them you'd be doing something useful. But you don't, do you? You just drone on with your 'Plan, plan. Over-fulfilled. Under-fulfilled.' It's dull reading and doesn't do the slightest good."

"The plan needs working for, you know," smiled Stoletov. "If the paper runs campaigns for fulfilling the plan it's because the plan's something to be respected."

"Respected, yes, I grant you that, but isn't it you I've heard talk about 'morale'? What does that mean to you; just a chap fulfilling the plan and having his mug stuck up on the honours board? But what about the fact that he goes on the booze? Oh, nobody's interested in that. No, I say that if you're going to educate a chap you've got to do an all-round job of it. If my son was like that I'd give him a good thrashing for that sort of morale. But he's not my son, so all I worry about is that the plan's fulfilled and as for the rest, it's not my business. . . ."

There was a bus coming up behind them in a cloud of dust. The driver caught sight of it in his mirror as it swung round from behind a clump of trees. Following the bus was a lorry with a load of long pieces of timber in tow.

"H'm, think they're going to pass us. I'm not going to allow that," said the driver, putting on a turn of speed. "You'll have to swallow our dust, my friends."

The car tore ahead. Verkhnyaya Kamenka was just in sight. The factory chimney railed its tail of smoke across the cloudless sky; the houses peeped through the pine trees and slipped out of sight again; a tall crane which had been installed recently on a building site slowly turned its long jib.

"We had the idea of taking up the question of the young workers' hostels," said Andrei, turning to Stoletov. "Living conditions in general. In short, the questions that were on the agenda of the Party bureau not long ago. I read the resolution but I am of the opinion that it doesn't go far enough and that it doesn't take all sides of the problem into account."

"No, it doesn't," Stoletov said. "Nearly all our young people are here on their own, without their parents; they came here to start an independent life. That's typical of new factories; we build in a new place, organize new shops and personnel. For those youngsters, new to work and new to living on their own, we have to be teachers and tutors and parents all at once. Yes, parents. We have that responsibility, too. All of us. Including you."

"Me? What sort of parent would I make?"

"I know you're a bit young for it, but the work you're doing means you've got to be that. You've got to teach and guide people the way your father did. Just you tell me how your father taught you."

"But he never did. . . ."

That was true, wasn't it? His father had never laid a hand on him, never read him sermons, seldom even swore at him. He was a fine man, a wonderful man but he hadn't done anything about "training" his son, had he?

But how, then, had he got such a firm idea of what his father considered good and what bad? What made him always try to avoid doing things he knew his father did not like? And why were his father's sparing words of praise so much dearer to him than the warmest congratulations of other people?

"He probably did teach me something," Andrei corrected himself. "But what it was I find it difficult to say. Perhaps, as a matter of fact, he still does: I always send him a copy of each edition of the paper, I'm longing to hear what he thinks of it. He'll probably criticize it. But I hope he doesn't find too many hard things to say."

"I'm pretty sure that your father had a clear idea of what he wanted you to grow up like," said Stoletov. "And according to that he either praised or disapproved of things you did. That, you see, is the entire basis of education—to know what you want to come out of it."

The happy, carefree faces of his own Ivan and Demyan suddenly swam into his mind's eye. What did he, Stepan Stoletov, want his sons to become? Gifted? Handsome? Happy? Varya thought Ivan had an unusual gift for music and saw him as a future violinist. Did he want a career like that for his son? Yes, of course.

But it could happen, couldn't it, that a son had no such gifts? It could easily happen that a man's sons follow him and remain rank-and-file workers. What should he want them to become in that case? The same as he wanted for himself—that they should make themselves useful and necessary in the line of work they chose for themselves, that they should devote themselves to it heart and soul.

"A real father takes pains to see that his son acquires a skill," he said to Andrei. "He sees to it that he learns his craft properly, that he doesn't stagnate but develops and grows up. A real father wants to feel proud of his son, and that's something we ought to wish for, too. If we do, it means making every effort to see our wish fulfilled. A father sees to it that his son is well-fed and properly clad and lives in decent conditions. He keeps him out of bad company and falling into bad ways. The influence of a good father lasts a long time: from babyhood to manhood, one might say. And we, too, ought to take an interest in all those things because the factory ought to be a real father to our young workers."

Andrei found himself thinking at a tangent; if there had been somebody at Verkhnyaya Kamenka whom his dad knew, he would never have given his son a letter of introduction to him. And if he had, it would have been just a note asking the man to give him hell if he worked badly. Perhaps it was all for the best that Nikolai had not been brought up by his father. . . .

Now the car had turned off the highway and was running along the unevenly cobbled road that led to the factory. Andrei smoothed his tousled

hair. That's right, lad, thought Stoletov; pull yourself together before going to work. And who could have taught him that but his father?

"We'll have another talk about this," Stoletov said as they parted at the door of his office. "Meanwhile think over what we ought to raise a shindy about and how to become a real father to our thousands of boys and girls. Work out something interesting and then tell me about it. I'm not clear myself about what is really needed."

Chapter Six

1

The day began badly for Nikolai.

That morning, when he came to the shop, he found that one of the young turners was having trouble with his lathe. At first the lad tried to mend matters himself, but after wasting an hour with no result, he came to Nikolai for help.

"One wouldn't think you'd been through the trainee's school," Nikolai chided him. "You studied theory, didn't you? What's gone wrong?"

He walked over to the lathe and, with a casual gesture, set it running. A fearsome grinding noise ensued. Nikolai at once switched off in alarm.

"We'll soon find out what the trouble is," he said, preserving his poise. "You should have come to me at once instead of wasting working-time."

The turner's face flushed; he watched tensely every move Nikolai made, trying to fathom what the defect was.

Thinking that nothing more serious had happened than that a shaving had dropped into some place where it should not be, Nikolai switched on several times more, but with the same appalling result.

"Just a moment," he muttered. "I'll fix it in a minute."

But ten minutes passed and then another ten minutes, and still the lathe would not run properly. His face smeared with oil, his hands scratched, Nikolai crawled underneath the lathe, examined it from all angles, but all in vain.

He stood beside the idle lathe mopping his brow. The other turners went on working calmly but Nikolai felt that they were casting looks of derision at him.

Realizing that he could do nothing with the lathe by himself, Nikolai hurried away to look for Yuri Sharov. But Sharov had left for a technical conference in town; Nikolai came back to the shop feeling thoroughly put out. Near the idle lathe stood two turners—grown-up men. They were explaining something to the embarrassed young culprit.

Catching sight of Nikolai, one of the men smiled and said: "No point in wasting all this time, comrade foreman. You ought to send for a repairer from the chief mechanic's department. You'll not manage it yourself."

Nikolai sensed an undertone of mockery in the man's voice. There was mockery, too, in the way he stressed the word "foreman," and in his ready assumption that Nikolai would not be able to repair the defective lathe himself. Nikolai flushed to the tips of his ears.

"Who gave you permission to leave your lathe?" he snapped with unusual asperity. "Be so good as to mind your own business and keep your advice for somebody else."

The man shrugged his shoulders and went back to his lathe; but the other worker laughed openly and said over his shoulder: "He can sew on buttons and mend a rent but when it comes to cutting a coat he has to send for a real tailor."

Nikolai felt so hurt that his ears rang. He wanted to retort to the quip but found nothing suitable for the occasion. He applied himself again to the lathe with a sense of helplessness that brought him to the very brink of tears. Just then he saw Andrei coming through the shop, an Andrei who walked confidently and light-heartedly with his hat carelessly tilted on the back of his head and who, it seemed to Nikolai, gave him the most perfunctory of glances.

Nikolai, who was about to run up to his friend and tell him all his woes, felt suddenly checked. It was all right for Andrei to stroll about the shop in that lordly manner. He was an editor. A fine post. But he, Nikolai, had to put up with sneers from anybody who felt like it. . . . No, he didn't want any of Andrei's sympathy.

He tussled with the lathe for almost another hour and finally had to ring up the chief mechanic's department. But his chapter of accidents was not at an end—he was told that the break-down gang was busy on an overhaul job in another shop.

"What's your little trouble? Maybe you can fix it on your own?"

Nikolai, however, did not know what the trouble was and, to conceal his ignorance, replaced the receiver without replying. He sent the young turner home and went to the chief mechanic's department to find out whether there was really no one there who could have a look at the lathe that day.

His mission was unsuccessful and he returned from it looking glum. Sitting at his desk, he tried not to look at the wretched lathe and was delighted when he saw dark-eyed Yasha Milovidov approach him with light, dancing steps.

Yasha gave him an engaging smile and said that it really upset him to see the foreman so worried about that damned lathe.

"What do you expect from our people?" he whispered confidentially into Nikolai's ear. "Machine-wreckers, that's what they are. A fellow who was a swineherd only yesterday gets a bit of training and is given a lathe to handle. Our old hands laugh, of course: here's a foreman with a diploma and he can't get a lathe to run. But don't take any notice of them. It's youth that runs this place, mainly, and youth will always back up a young foreman."

Milovidov's solicitous manner was much to Nikolai's liking but for appearance's sake he frowned; he considered saying that the sneers of the older workers left him quite unmoved, but decided not to, and went on listening.

Milovidov, still smiling, said that Nikolai was a far better foreman than others, better even than Yuri Sharov because Yuri had them all worn out with his technical studies and various innovations.

"He boasts too much and he's mad about machinery," said Yasha with much play of his jet-black eyes. "He never mixes with the young people, never asks them round and never goes out with them. . . . Now

I could tell the sort you are from the first: you don't avoid working people, you've no objections to mixing with us, have you?"

Nikolai said he had no such objections and Yasha, addressing him in the familiar second person singular, at once went on to tell him that as foreman Nikolai had made one mistake: he had not respected the old tradition of standing treat to his turners.

"Of course, you can't treat them all, that would cost too much," Yasha murmured. "But you ought to encourage the chaps you can always rely on for support. Haven't I been working all right all this time? Nobody can say that Yasha Milovidov has let the new foreman down."

What Yasha said about his work was true enough. Every day he produced considerably more than his stint, turned in work of excellent standard, came to the shop earlier than anybody else and never smoked on the job.

"You can count on me always," he whispered. "And there are other lads, too. Don't you worry about that lathe. I'll go straight away and bring a repair gang from the chief mechanic's department."

"There's no one free there at the moment. I've already been there. They can't send anyone."

"Maybe not for others but they'll find someone for you."

Yasha went off somewhere and soon after two fitters came in and quickly put the lathe in order.

"You shouldn't have sent the turner home," said Yasha. "But that's easily remedied. I'll take over his work on top of my own. Don't worry, Nikolai Nikolayevich, you won't have any trouble. Only don't refuse to come out with us. What about going to the restaurant tonight?"

Nikolai agreed joyfully and asked who else he ought to invite. Yasha mentioned Vladimir Nazarenko and another turner, saying that he would take care of the invitations.

"Straight after work, then. We'll just go home to change."

Nazarenko alone agreed to come; the other turner was busy.

"That doesn't matter," said Yasha as the three young men entered the restaurant.

The Green Mountain Restaurant was located in a two-storey building standing on its own. The large dining-room was fitted up in the manner of the best town restaurants—yellow marble pillars rose to the ceiling, the walls were hung with pictures in broad gilt frames, a low platform was occupied by the band in which the main attraction was a girl with a large accordion in her lap. The waitresses wore white silk aprons and starched lace head-dresses; the *maitre d'hôtel* wore a jacket with cut-away front looking like a morning coat.

The place was almost empty when Nikolai and his party arrived. At one table some men who had been visiting the factory on business were having supper; another was occupied by a man and woman—she young and bashful in a silk frock with a bold flower pattern, he in a spick-and-span grey suit.

"Those are our newly-weds," Yasha scoffed. "Catch me taking my own wife out to a restaurant. Not much fun in that."

Yasha behaved as if he was a regular *habitué* of the restaurant; he called the waitress by her first name and chose a table near the band. Nikolai and Nazarenko followed him obediently.

Having ascertained from Nikolai how much money he was prepared

to spend, Yasha ordered the meal. Vodka, beer, *hors-d'oeuvres*, with Siberian dumplings to follow—the job might have been an assignment of the utmost importance—so business-like was his manner, so rapt his attention.

The food was slow in coming. Yasha poured out the vodka.

"We'll start on vodka with beer as a chaser," he said. "It'll be hours before they bring the *hors-d'oeuvres*."

Nikolai looked at his glass warily. On those rare occasions when he had drunk vodka at home it was in small noggins; and, generally speaking, at student parties drinking had been confined to beer and cheap wine.

The vodka went to his head at once: long before the *hors-d'oeuvres* were served he was seeing double. The voices of Yasha and Nazarenko merged into one and he found it increasingly difficult to make out what they were saying. He firmly pushed his beer glass away from him.

"I'll have a soft drink. No beer for me."

Yasha looked at him with withering scorn but went over to the bar himself for a bottle of lemonade. Nikolai gulped down two glasses and at once felt better. He started listening to the conversation. The talk was about love and family life. Yasha was arguing that love and family life are two quite separate things, while Nazarenko asserted that only when one is in love can one settle down to family life.

"The main thing about family life is that it gives you a real friend," said Nazarenko. "I don't mean, of course, that a chap can't make friends among his comrades, but his wife is his best friend. For better or for worse. I share everything with my wife. There's nothing I can't talk to her about, whether it's about the factory or the way I feel about things. Nobody understands me as well as she does. Do you know how much I love her? Why, I could kill a man for her, if you want to know."

"You don't call yourself a husband, do you?" sneered Yasha. "Why, you don't even live together. You don't know the way your wife spends her nights. . . ."

"Shut your mug," shouted Nazarenko, springing to his feet and making as if to fling himself on Yasha. "If you say another word against Valya. . . ."

His face had suddenly turned pale, his broad brows contracted in a single line, his fists clenched convulsively.

"Steady on," said Yasha. He was still smiling. "I didn't say a word against your wife. What I was saying was that you're in a rotten position—you're in love, you have these fine feelings but you don't have any family life. Why not? Because you've got the wrong ideas about marriage and the rest of it. A man ought to marry a woman who makes him cosy, so he can come home after work and find everything nice and comfy. So he can be the boss in his own home. And what sort of a home have you got, eh? Living in a hostel like you were before you got married, and your wife living in another one. Here am I offering you my pity and sympathy and all you do is to jump on me. Sit down, let's have a drink and something to eat—look what's come. There are eggs in the salad."

He filled Nazarenko's glass up with vodka, helped him to the *hors-d'oeuvres* and smiled at him genially.

"No brawling or fighting, mind. Otherwise the comrade foreman will think that we lads don't know how to behave properly, that we can't take our drink and talk about things decently. Of course we have our scraps

now and then," Yasha turned to Nikolai, "but I don't approve of them. Why, only the other day a fellow went for me. He gave me a bruise—and people thought I was to blame. But I wasn't at all. I didn't start it. I don't like fighting."

"That's because you're a coward. You spit out some filthy remark and scoot. And your remarks are worse than bruises."

Nazarenko sat down still looking upset and out of humour, but Yasha did not seem to notice his frown and held up a glass.

"Here's to reconciliation," he said and downed his vodka in one gulp. "That's enough palaver, I'm going to listen to the band."

The band was playing a *pot-pourri* of popular songs. Nikolai, for some reason, did not like it at all: just when you started listening to some good tune the band broke off and began another one only to slide cunningly into a third after a little while. The girl with the accordion sat looking like a doll without the least expression on her stiff, painted face—and he didn't like that either.

The restaurant was filling up. At the next table sat a party of men no older than Nikolai and his companions. They waved to Yasha and asked the waitress to bring them beer. She returned with ten bottles.

"Fellows from the foundry," Yasha said with respect. "They like to swim in it."

Once more he filled the glasses with vodka, insisting that they be emptied straight away. Why not have a bit of fun instead of sitting round like old men? He shouted, tapped his knife on the edge of his plate to make the waitress hurry. She brought the dumplings in a silver tureen; Yasha served them with a large soup-ladle.

They drank to friendship, to success, to love. The band played a waltz and several pairs turned between the tables—the girls in party frocks and one of them in a long evening gown, the young men in well-cut suits with bright ties, and shiny low-topped boots.

Nikolai thought of Andrei and urged Yasha to go to the newspaper office and bring him to join them.

"Quite a glamour boy. I've seen him," said Yasha. "But why ask him now? Wait a bit. We'll walk over there later. We need a few more drinks. Dance a bit, too. What about those nice little bits over there? Should we ask 'em?"

Nikolai said no, he didn't feel like it. He had drunk enough to feel that he could confide in his new friends and he started telling them about Nina. He told them about his last meeting with her, how they had sat on a bench on the boulevard, how he wanted to tell Nina that he loved her but had not been able to get it out, how she had come to the station with a bunch of flowers and given it to Andrei instead of to him.

"Good for her," said Yasha. "A girl doesn't like a fellow who can't make up his mind. What a girl likes is not to be given any time for second thoughts. He's gone—all right, call it a day. That's just dreaming, not love. Sheer waste of time. While you're dreaming about her here, she'll get herself another fellow."

"She won't do that. She's not that sort."

"They're all that sort," Yasha said casually. "To look at them you'd think they were as quiet as mice, but they're all the same."

Jumping up, he walked round the table, went up to a girl who was sitting in a large party and asked her if she would like to dance. The girl

took the floor with him readily. That was something Nikolai did not like—a girl nestling up to one chap and then going and forgetting everything when she's in Yasha's arms, whirling between the tables.

"Nina's not that sort, I'm telling you," Nikolai said to Nazarenko. "She doesn't let anybody else touch her, and I—I don't go in for flirting. I'm not interested."

"I believe you, all right," said Nazarenko and his eyes lost their slightly tipsy look and brightened up. "Don't listen to Yasha. He always says rotten things about girls. He treats his wife badly and she's got a kid, you know. My wife's expecting a baby. I'm awfully glad. I'm really fond of my Valya. The only trouble is we haven't a room—she lives in one hostel and I'm in another. Life's hard that way. We want to live together."

"I bet you do," said Nikolai, thinking of Nina. But what if she wouldn't have him? How could he win her over?

"You've no idea what my Valya's like," continued Nazarenko. "She's clever. . . . Works as a typist in the newspaper office. I only went to trade school. Now I'm going to evening class. But I don't study well. The trombone's my ruin, Valya says. I'm terribly keen on music; I play in the band. Actually, I'm much more interested in the band than in evening classes."

"I haven't had one letter from Nina yet. And I've sent her four myself. I'll write to her again today. I'll tell her about you, about this party."

"I lost my parents in the war, you see," said Nazarenko, disregarding Nikolai. "Valya's like my own family to me. She does everything for me. Look at this shirt, she embroidered it for me. She cooks my dinner—I go and have it in her room in the hostel. I give her all my wages. We've bought a dining-room suite but there's nowhere to put it. Had to leave it in store. . . . All the same, they ought to give us a room because of the baby—we can't go on like this. . . . They've got to do something. . . . They build those hostels but there are lots of young people married like Valya and me."

They went on talking about their own lives, not listening to each other. Yet they enjoyed this conversation and when Yasha, after seeing his partner back to her place, returned to the table, they were sorry to have to bring it to an end. But there was no option—Yasha at once kicked up a fuss; the food was cold, they weren't drinking their vodka fast enough, they needed more beer.

"See that bit of stuff?" he asked, nodding towards the next table. "Hot dancer. She's not from the factory. Lives the other side of the lake. The boys are from there, too. Rowed over. I tried to get her to come for a stroll with me afterwards. Said she's game but she's scared the boys would tell her mother."

"You're not scared that somebody would tell your wife, I suppose," said Nazarenko harshly. "Not very nice for her to find out that you're strolling in the park at night with a girl you've picked up somewhere, is it?"

"If you're going to be scared of your own wife you might as well be dead. I'm not going to spend my time getting browned off at home. My motto is: earn money and enjoy yourself!"

"Then you shouldn't have got married. Just to make a mess of someone else's life. You could have fooled around on your own then."

"My marriage was the result of tragic circumstances," said Yasha mysteriously. "You don't know anything about it. It's not for you to judge."

He pulled a gloomy face and tossed down a glass of beer. Was there really some tragedy in Yasha's life, wondered Nikolai. He felt sorry for the chap. In fact, he felt sorry for everybody—Yasha, Nazarenko, himself. . . . Tears came to his eyes, he wanted to say something that would express sympathy; he wanted the others to console him in his own sorrow.

The band was playing a melancholy air; the girl in the band placed her accordion on the floor and rose to sing. Her voice was low and husky, her face as expressionless as ever, but now it seemed to Nikolai that she was singing beautifully, with exquisite taste and the most profound emotion.

The restaurant was stuffy; Nikolai's head swam. If he could only go outside into the fresh air and find Andrei and tell him everything: how unhappy he was to think that Nina had forgotten him and grown sick of him; how unfair it was that Nazarenko and his wife were forced to live apart though they had bought a dining-room suite and there was a baby on the way; how wrong it was to criticize Yasha because in his private life there were "tragic circumstances."

Nikolai looked longingly towards the window. The white silk curtains stirred faintly in the light breeze; outside it must be cool and still. But here in this stuffy place the hum of voices, the clatter of dishes and the noisy music merged into a hateful din.

"Should we go?" he said irresolutely. "I've got a bit of a headache. We could go for a walk in the park."

Yasha had no intention of leaving.

"Want to go for a walk, do you?" he said testily, a vicious expression creeping into his face. "Grudge spending your money on us, do you, comrade engineer? That's not the way to do things here. One round of drinks and then home! Oh no. When we go to a party we expect something serious, not some half-hearted do."

"That may be your way," said Nazarenko, "but why should you take it on yourself to speak for the whole factory."

"I'm speaking for all those fellows who are worth anything. Not for those who are tied to their wives' apron-strings. I'm speaking for the real men. Order some more, comrade engineer. Have you got enough money left?"

Nikolai dug into his pockets and put on the table all the money he could find.

"Here you are. That's all I've got. Count it, order something and settle the bill yourself."

Yasha counted the money and nodded approvingly.

"Enough and more for us to drink till dawn. Now, let's see. . . ."

But Nikolai suddenly stood up and staggered across the room which now seemed much bigger; he passed the empty tables, the band.

He had to have some air. He would go outside, he would walk to the factory for Andrei, who would probably still be working. He would bring Andrei back to the restaurant, introduce him to Yasha and Nazarenko and then the four of them would sit together. With Andrei beside him everything would be better and clearer, the pillars would stop rocking,

the noise would die down and that grey-haired man with the familiar sun-burned face at the next table would no longer look at him with that unfriendly, mocking expression.

What was that man thinking? That Nikolai was drunk? He wasn't the slightest bit drunk. He would walk past that man as steadily as could be, with his head high, independent and calm as befitted an engineer.

He reeled but managed to grasp the back of a chair and steady himself. The grey-haired man went on looking at him disapprovingly. But Nikolai summoned up all his will-power and strength and, taking his bearing on the door, quickly crossed the room.

The diners saw a pale-faced young man with ruffled hair and eyes riveted on one point ahead, making his way across the restaurant floor. The young man looked pitiful; he would surely fall if he bumped into anything.

Yasha, who was dancing unwittingly, touched Nikolai's shoulder. Yasha was dancing badly, shuffling his feet and turning aimlessly on one spot.

The waitress cleared the table and removed the beer-stained cloth.

"Would you mind settling the bill?" she said to Yasha when he returned from seeing his partner to her table. "We're closing."

Yasha handed the girl some crumpled notes. He tossed the change carelessly on the table.

"That's for you," he said. "Sorry for the trouble. . . ."

With a grimace the waitress picked up the soiled notes and put them in the pocket of her apron.

2

Andrei leaned over the table and ran a critical eye over the page schemes of the next number of the paper. Not a sign of anything lively in it. Leading article about the building of a new block of flats. Vanya Poperechny had written it with the help of an official statement. It listed the building teams, referred to their successes and to the fact that they had outstripped their plan.

That they probably had done. Vanya had, no doubt, avoided making any mistakes in the names of the best building workers; all the same, the article was more like a report by a clerk of works than an editorial—it posed no questions, criticized nobody, led nowhere.

"Is it really worth making a leading article out of that construction job?" Andrei asked. "Perhaps it would be enough if we kept it to the news columns."

But Vanya stuck up for his article: the block of flats was an important matter, everybody was waiting for it to be completed and everybody would find the editorial interesting.

"Interesting? I wonder. . . . All right, let it go."

Below the editorial there was a space for a feature article about the building in question. It was signed "Potapov, bricklayer," but Andrei heard Vanya dictating it straight on to the typewriter from his own notebook.

There was to be an illustration in the middle of the page. On the scheme there was the word "picture." Below it, four short articles on various topics.

"What picture are we using, Vanya?"

Vanya leaned over the scheme as if hoping to find there something that Andrei had missed, and said casually:

"We'll decide that when we get a proof. We'll see what'll fit."

What would fit! That was the way the whole page was made up. Twenty lines here, thirty there. But where was the basic material? The stuff that really mattered? The kind of article that Stoletov and he had been talking about.

"We can't put the paper out like this." Andrei pushed the scheme aside. "We must think about something better to lead off with."

"Then we'll be out late. We're behind time as it is."

"All right, we shall be late," Andrei said stubbornly. "I'm not going to pass the paper as it is now."

Vanya frowned and pondered, turning over in his mind what the paper could lead on.

"I'll pop along to the workers' inventions office and get two or three more items out of them. We might write up something for the head of the office to sign; he promised he would."

Vanya picked up a notebook, put a sharp point to his pencil and was about to leave the room when Andrei stopped him.

"Drop this habit of writing other people's stories for them, please," Andrei said irritably. "Ask the head of that office to write the article himself. Your job is to get other people to write, understand? You can help them with advice on how to write but I want you to stop writing things yourself and then shoving other people's names under them."

"But nobody will write for us," Vanya said confidently. "Everybody's busy with his own affairs. What's more, we don't pay. Our fellows say it's better to write for the regional newspaper: it pays, and gives you the feeling of being a real writer."

"You ought to tell them that a real writer's not primarily interested in his fees. Go and talk to them and give them a few days to get something ready for us."

Vanya shook his head sceptically and went out. He would try, of course, but what would come out of it he didn't know.

After another scrutiny of the page schemes, Andrei went straight to Stoletov. Perhaps he had sorted out the material for the campaign on the Kovalev invention. But Stoletov was not in; his desk was occupied by Vasili Nikitich, the cultural worker, who, when consulted by Andrei, replied that the main thing to stress in the paper was the importance of political studies.

"Our results weren't bad last year but we mustn't grow smug. We must go on hammering in the same point. During the summer everybody grows lazy and abandons his books and exchanges them for fishing-rods and so on."

"Perhaps you'd care to write us an article on the subject. Just a short one, a page and a half of typescript."

"I'll write it. You're not giving me much room, of course, but I'll do my best."

While they were talking, Lyuba Zvonaryeva came in and sat down on the sofa. Andrei looked at her hard; he had met this pretty girl several times.



Sensing his glance, Lyuba turned to the window. Andrei resumed his conversation with Vasili Nikitich.

"I'd like something with a bit of snap in it," he said. "Maybe you could take one workshop and write about a particular order."

Lyuba, who had hitherto been silent, suddenly grew alert.

"I've a splendid letter here about one order," she said. "In my opinion, we ought to draw everybody's attention to that order and finish it ahead of delivery date. But nobody's paying any attention to the letter."

"What letter are you talking about?" asked Andrei. "What's the order?"

"The letter is addressed to our Comsomol members and to all our young workers. The order is equipment for the oil industry."

"For the oil workers?" said Vasili Nikitich. "We can do something about that. True, it's not much of an order and hasn't come in for much attention. But it's worth while, especially if there's a letter."

"Please show me the letter, there's a good girl," said Andrei, rising quickly to his feet.

"That's a queer way to talk. I've got a name, haven't I?" the girl snapped. "It's Zvonaryeva. I'd have thought you'd have remembered. I'll show you the letter, but what do you intend doing with it?"

Andrei lost no time in telling her his plans: he would print the letter in the middle of page one and devote a leading article to the subject,

going into the question of how work on the order might be speeded up. In the next issue he would print a reply and, if it could be arranged, pledges by the shops, teams and individual workers.

Lyuba listened attentively, occasionally nodding her pretty curly-haired head.

"Come along to the Comsomol committee office, Comrade Korolev," she said. "I'll let you have that letter."

The letter was interesting. It told how young workers lived and worked in the steppes of Bashkiria where during the war vast oil deposits were found in the Devonian System about two kilometres deep. It described how in a barren place that used to be known as Devil's Field, a "Second Baku" had been developed, how in the early days people lived in tents and dug-outs but were now building beautiful new towns, and how important it was for the oil-field to get the equipment that was being made at Verkhnyaya Kamenka.

"We are writing to ask your Comsomol organization to take an interest in our order," the letter concluded. "We are asking your young metal workers to help our young oil workers."

"We'll print it on the front page with a bold headline," said Andrei. "The paper's coming out tomorrow; we'll spend the night in the print-shop if need be, but we'll manage it all right. If you like we can go along together now and settle the whole lay-out and choose the type."

Lyuba felt like saying that she did not understand anything about type and had not the least idea what a lay-out was, but Andrei was so certain that she would be interested in these things that he did not even wait for her consent—he simply got up and moved towards the door. So Lyuba went with him, deciding that as the letter was Comsomol business it was up to her to help the paper as much as she could.

Besides—and this was something Lyuba did not admit to herself—she liked Andrei. As she followed him to the print-shop she stole a glance into a pocket mirror and straightened her hair.

The italic type turned out to be small and badly worn. To set the letter in it would be disastrous, so Andrei gave instructions for it to be set in the usual type but leaded and framed with a double rule.

Lyuba looked round the print-shop with interest. The glum-looking printer was again engaged in printing some announcement by the housing and general amenities office, a girl comp. was setting an article about new acquisitions by the library. Matter which had already been set and held over stood tied up with string in rows on the make-up "stone."

By the time Vanya Poperechny returned and announced that he had asked the chief of the workers' inventions office to write an article, the entire front page had been re-schemed. In the middle, occupying a full half of the page was the letter, and above it Andrei had written in bold lettering: "We Must Deliver the Oil Workers' Order Ahead of Time."

"What we need is a very short editorial, appealing to our young workers to answer that letter," said Andrei. "And we need at once material from the first machine shop about the way work is going on that order. We'd like you to write the editorial, Lyuba, while Vanya and I go along to the first shop. I'd go on my own but I don't know anybody there and we haven't much time."

Lyuba's first reaction was to say she did not know how to write editorials, that she had never written one in her life. But she agreed and

went reluctantly to the Comsomol committee office—to think. Just as Andrei and Vanya were about to leave the office, Valya, the typist, who had hitherto taken no part in all the excitement, said:

"It's all very well your bringing in copy but who is going to set it? If you're relying on Tamara and the other case-hand, you'll never get the paper out by tomorrow. It'll take them till this time tomorrow to set it."

"That's true," said Vanya. "We're going to use practically nothing of what we've got standing; it'll mean a lot of setting and they're horribly slow. What can we do about it?"

He looked at Andrei in despair but Andrei knew no more than Vanya did about what ought to be done. Would they really have to hold up the paper another day?

He sat down again, stared at the page scheme and wondered how to get out of this fix. Valya looked with sympathy at the distracted editor. The whole letter affair was very much to her liking. As she typed a copy of the original letter she imagined the oil-field town just as she had seen one on the screen: a forest of derricks, white buildings and, in the distance, the sea and yachts with big sails gliding across it. She knew that there were neither sea nor yachts in the steppes of Bashkiria, but the town must be even more lovely than the one in the picture because it was new. . . . And now that letter could not be published on time.

"Comrade Korolev," said Valya, "I'll try and get a comp. for you. I don't know whether she'll agree but I'll do my best to persuade her."

"Are you thinking of Polina?" asked Poperechny. "You'll waste your time crawling before her. She won't come. When she left she said she'd never set foot in the place again."

"Oh, she did, did she?" Valya said scornfully. "She talked that way because she was angry with Chumov. Now it's different. She belongs to the Comsomol, doesn't she? This is a Comsomol matter."

Valya rose, smoothed her checked blouse and asked Andrei whether she could go.

"Of course, Valya. You'll be our salvation if you talk this Polina over," said Andrei, handing Valya her shawl and bag. "Hurry up. Tell her that we're all begging her to come—the editorial office and the Comsomol committee. If she can't manage to come during working hours, let her come in the evening, it doesn't matter how late. We'll wait for her."

"Working hours, indeed," Valya snorted. "She's a hostel warden. If we could only get her to do it, if only she'll agree. . . ."

Valya waddled out of the office.

No sooner had the door closed behind her than in came the glum-faced printer. Without addressing or looking at anybody in particular, he said:

"It isn't my job to work at night. I'm knocking off at the usual time. That means you'll have to find a printer, too."

Poperechny looked at the printer with alarm: the printer leaned against the door jamb, smoking and carelessly dropping ashes on to Valya's typewriter.

"Where are we going to find one?" Poperechny faltered. "You know very well that there's not another printer in the whole factory."

"That's not my affair."

He dropped some more ash on Valya's desk and turned on his way back to the print-shop.

"Tidy up that mess you've made with your cigarette ash," said Andrei in quiet level tones. "That's to begin with. And then get your press ready for night work. That will be all for the present."

Poperechny looked round. He saw an Andrei he did not recognize: the pleasant, open face of a moment before had become stony, the brows had contracted, the eyes grown cold and hard as they bored through the printer. For a moment the printer was at a loss; his face lost its self-confident expression. He leaned forward and blew the ash off the paper on Valya's desk; but then he recovered his poise and mumbled:

"You've no right to make me work overtime. Overtime's voluntary. It needs a special agreement and a bonus."

"Did you hear me? I told you to get your press ready. I'm not going to argue with you."

Andrei put on his hat, picked up a notebook and turned to Poperechny.

"Let's go. We must try and collect our copy before Valya gets back."

As they went out they passed the printer, ignoring him completely; he drew back astonished to let them by.

"That was marvellous," said Poperechny when they were outside in the square. "You put him in his place all right. He's a poisonous old fellow. He knows he's the only printer in the place so he thinks he can get away with anything."

"He won't get away with anything else, I can assure you. If he doesn't come to his senses, I'll charge him with obstructing the work of the office."

Andrei spoke confidently but, actually, there was little confidence in his heart. What if the printer fulfilled his threat not to do night-work?

Oh, to hell with him, he thought. He and Poperechny between them could handle the press. It couldn't be all that hard; they'd get the paper out somehow.

They entered the first machine shop and walked along the gallery that ran up the middle. Large rooms opened on to it, occupied by the shop organizations. On the broad corridor were doors bearing glass plates with glittering gold letters on them. The first one read: "Shop Manager A.M. Kovalev."

Andrei felt his heart contract slightly: how would Kovalev treat the representative of the factory newspaper? His relations with Chumov had been bad, the paper had not supported his invention, hardly an issue passed without some digs at the manager of the first machine shop.

Andrei would gladly have walked past the door, leaving the interview to Poperechny. He glanced over his shoulder. Poperechny had stopped just behind him and was running a comb through his curly hair. He looked nervous. There was nothing for Andrei to do but pull himself together, master his uneasiness and firmly open the door.

The office of the shop manager had a large window overlooking the shop. It resembled a balcony from where the chief could command a view of the whole place. One side of the window was open and through it could be heard the clatter of the lathes, like the roar of the angry sea.

You'd think he was on the captain's bridge, Andrei said to himself, looking at Kovalev who had his back turned to the door as he watched something going on down below in the shop.

In his blue jacket with brass buttons, the keen-eyed, deeply-tanned

Kovalev did resemble a sailor. He turned slowly as Andrei and Poperechny walked in and looked at them in silence.

"We are from the factory newspaper," said Andrei. "This is Comrade Poperechny, the editorial secretary. I'm the editor. . . ."

His voice sounded hoarse. Could it be from excitement? He cleared his throat and at once started to tell Kovalev about the letter from the young oil workers and of their request for their equipment to be delivered ahead of time.

"We would like to know what possibilities you see of speeding up that job."

Andrei still had that rasping feeling in his throat and as soon as he had finished he looked for a water jug. It stood on a table in the corner. Trying to keep calm, Andrei walked across to it and poured himself a glass of water.

Kovalev eyed him narrowly, weighing up every movement; then he pushed aside a few folders on his desk and said tersely:

"There are plenty of possibilities." Then, after a brief pause: "That is, if all the shops apply themselves to the matter."

He listed the reasons why the order was crawling at caterpillar speed from one operation to another: faulty planning inside the factory—according to the present plan several different parts had to be worked on the same machine—what was needed was a strict system of priorities. The designers had made an error in one part and this had been discovered only after the part had been made. Three machines in the shop were held up, waiting for repair.

"Those are what you might call the objective reasons," concluded Kovalev. "I can tell you some subjective ones, too."

His expression was bored: he was tired of talking on the subject or else he considered it a sheer waste of time to talk to the press. As he spoke he kept getting up and looking out of the window: there was something happening in the shop that worried him.

From time to time people put their heads round the door. Each time that happened, Kovalev told the man that he was engaged and asked him to call later. Andrei felt that Kovalev was impatient for the moment when he would be rid of him and could turn at last to real matters.

He felt hurt and put his notebook away.

"Perhaps you would write a small article for us, mentioning all those points," he said. "Your opinion on the factory as a whole."

"Oh no. You leave me out of it," Kovalev smiled. "Why should I write in the paper? I can take my complaints to the factory manager."

There was a superior note in Kovalev's manner; Andrei flushed to the temples.

"I don't see how an article by you in the paper would hamper you in your talk with the factory manager. We are coming out tomorrow; the article will be read in the shops as well as in the managerial offices. It will make people think. It can give a jolt to a great number of people at once. I am afraid you underrate the importance of the printed word."

The tickle in Andrei's throat had gone; he spoke firmly and loudly, and Kovalev glanced at him with interest. Andrei caught the glance but did not flinch; unsmilingly he met Kovalev's eyes. He was really angry and wanted the other to know it.

Kovalev noticed it.

"Underrate the printed word?" he echoed. "If the word's precise and business-like, I value it very highly. But do you really want me to write the article? Couldn't you work up our talk into an interview?"

Andrei was going to raise objections but at that moment the door opened once more and Kovalev nodded to the new-comer to stay.

"Very well, then," said Andrei. "I'll write it as an interview. But would you mind coming to the editorial office in two or three hours' time and running your eye over it?"

"All right," Kovalev assented and shouted to his visitor. "Come in, come in, I'm expecting you."

A young worker came in holding a small casting and a blue print; Kovalev at once became animated. He switched on a bright lamp that stood next to his desk, unrolled the blue print and pored over it.

Glad to have got rid of us, thought Andrei as he returned to the floor of the shop down the broad staircase. So he didn't believe in the usefulness of the paper. Wasn't interested in the article, not in anything the paper was doing. A bad business. . . .

He felt he would like to see Nikolai. But then Nikolai would not be interested in newspaper matters. How was he getting on at his work this afternoon? The turning lathes—Nikolai's section—lay quite near the windows. The men and women who manned them were really only boys and girls. Two lathes were idle, with several workers standing round them. Among them he recognized Nikolai. Squatting on his haunches, he was craning his head under a lathe and fixing something. There was another man in the same position beside him.

Andrei walked past the group without stopping. Farther on he saw Dusya. She was standing beside a welding set, her eyes intent on the narrow pink joint in the metal, her face tense and serious.

Andrei felt a twinge of envy as he watched these people: among them were men and women who had distinguished themselves in various ways, while all that was left for him to do was to write about other people's successes.

In this frame of mind he entered his office. Lyuba ran up to him.

"I've written it. But I don't know if it's any good. I haven't had it typed yet. Please have a look at it."

The girl's face was all excitement. She put in order a number of pages with many corrections and blots and looked vexedly at Valya who launched forth on a detailed description of how she had gone to Polina, how Polina had cursed the paper and repeated her threat never to set foot in the editorial office again, but how, at length, she had consented to come at four o'clock.

"She's very touchy, Comrade Korolev," Valya added. "Please don't forget that when you see her."

"I certainly won't forget it," said Andrei. "And thank you for all the trouble you've taken, Valya."

Andrei read Lyuba's editorial and commended her highly for it. They quickly chose a suitable headline; Lyuba hurried back to the Comsomol committee room to dictate the work to a typist, and Andrei turned to his interview with Kovalev.

He worked for over an hour on it. He took more pains with it than he had ever done with an exam paper at the university. He wanted

Kovalev to like the article. Time and again he made corrections as he searched for the most telling phrases.

At length he telephoned to Kovalev.

Half an hour later Kovalev entered the office, read the article carefully, added a word or two here and there and set his sprawling signature at the end of it.

"Well done. It would have taken me three days to write this."

"So we can print it not as an interview but as an article by you?" Andrei asked. He looked delighted. "Next time, though, please write it yourself."

"If any good comes of this article, I will. When did you say you are coming out? Tomorrow. Send me several copies, please."

Valya showed Kovalev out of the office with admiration written all over her face. For the first time since she had worked on the paper the manager of the best shop in the factory had come to the office. And that was the work of this new editor, Andrei Borisovich. Such a thing could not have happened in Chumov's time.

Nor would Polina ever have come back to the print-shop if Chumov had been there. On the stroke of four the door burst open and Polina appeared on the threshold. Valya noticed at once that Polina had taken a lot of trouble over her appearance before coming. She wore a new silk frock, light-coloured shoes, and sheer silk stockings. Her hair lay in curls and from her ears dangled crescent-shaped ivory ear-rings. Her lips were painted, her nose carefully powdered.

Polina struck a pose at the door. Here I am, take a good look at me, her haughty glance seemed to say. I'm no trainee, no Tamara whom no respectable case-room would trust to "dis." type. I'm a qualified worker. I know what I'm worth and I don't allow anybody to underrate me.

Interpreting that glance correctly, Andrei stood up and walked across the room towards the visitor.

"Polina Georgievna, isn't it?" he said. "My name is Korolev. I'm the editor. Please come in."

He showed Polina to a chair. Valya nodded approvingly: that was exactly the right way to handle the proud and touchy Polina.

"Thank you for coming," Andrei said. "We'd be quite lost without you here."

He told Polina about the oil workers' letter, showed her Kovalev's article and asked her to step into the print-shop and decide how the letter could best be set up. As they walked into the print-shop Polina cast a patronizing look at the printer who watched her with extreme distaste; she embraced the two trainees.

"Hello, my pets," she said. "Why do you never come to see me? I miss you terribly, you know."

The girls looked at her with adoration although she immediately scolded them roundly for various technical shortcomings.

"Such a marvellous letter and you set it as if you were doing coupons for the canteen. Comrade Korolev, we've got a new type, awfully pretty. Let's set it in that."

She quickly found the cases which no one in the print-shop except her knew about, placed them on a free table and took the manuscript from Tamara.

"I'll set a few lines," she said, adjusting her composing-stick. "We'll pull a proof and see whether you like the type-face. I think you will. It'll stand out from all the rest of the page."

"I'm sorry for your dress, Polina Georgievna," said Andrei. "Perhaps we could ask Tamara to run and get your overall?"

"My dress? Oh, that doesn't matter," said Polina with a shrug that set her ear-rings dancing. "Will one of you girls find me a big sheet of paper and pin it round me. That's the way. Now my dress is safe."

Polina's fingers darted from type-case to composing-stick; Andrei heaved a sigh of relief.

They were delicate fingers which curved slightly as they closed lightly on the type. It seemed to Andrei that she was bound to be making many mistakes for as she worked she chatted with the two girls without looking at the case. But he said nothing and went off to his office: mistakes can be corrected, the main thing was to have something to make mistakes on!

"Is she working?" Valya whispered conspiratorially as the door closed behind him. "That means she'll stay. She's had enough of the hostel as it is and only needed to be asked to return. You treated her like a Stalin Prize winner."

There was not a single mistake in the first galley-proof that Polina laid before Andrei shortly afterwards. It was a piece of type-setting that would have done credit to any newspaper; each paragraph opened with a fine drop letter.

"That's first-rate. It's wonderful!" Andrei enthused. "Now we'll have to revise the setting of the whole page. We can't have anything mediocre along with this work of art."

"I'll look it over," said Polina. "You attend to your business and I'll look after mine. . . ."

Her paper apron creaking as she walked, Polina returned to the print-shop. Andrei consulted Valya about how to get Polina back for keeps.

"It would suit us very well. But will her chief let her leave the hostel?"

"He certainly will," said Valya. "She's been nagging him all the time for some special curtains and table-cloths she wants for the hostel. He'll be glad to get rid of her. Of course, the girls in the hostel will moan about it."

When the hooter went at five o'clock the printer came out of the print-shop and, averting his eyes, said to Andrei:

"The printing-press is in order, Comrade Korolev. I'll go and have my dinner while the comps. are finishing their work."

The man might have been asking a favour. Or was that only Andrei's imagination? Anyway, he replied drily:

"You may go. Please be back punctually at seven."

Mouth agape and fingers at rest on the keyboard of her typewriter, Valya watched the printer's face. That was a lesson in the different ways you had to use to influence people: a chair and polite words for one, a rebuke for another.

Page two was filled almost entirely with material that had been standing in type. Andrei reread and corrected the articles and became so absorbed in his work that he did not notice that the daylight had faded, that the glum-faced printer had returned to the print-shop and that Valya, having finished her work, remained sitting at her desk waiting patiently to catch his eye.

At last Valya coughed tactfully, once, twice; Andrei raised his eyes from the proofs.

"Why are you sitting there, Valentina Ivanovna?" he asked, feeling guilty for having kept her after working hours and with nothing to do, at that.

"I thought there might be something else," said Valya, hurriedly gathering up her things. She slipped the cover on her typewriter and put her papers away in the desk. "You can send Vanya for me if you need me later. I live quite close."

In the print-shop the printer had taken a first pull of the front page; everybody crowded round the table to see it.

"Comes out dull," said Polina. "We need a block that fits the subject, something with oil derricks."

"I don't know where we can get one," said Andrei. "We've nothing of Bashkiria in stock."

"It needn't be Bashkiria," said Polina. "Any oil derricks and such-like would do. Just to catch the eye. . . . I'll find one—we used to have some pictures of Baku. Where do you keep the old half-tones, girls? Come and look through them."

They rummaged for some time in the cupboard where the blocks were kept; at length they chose one.

"Please let me have a pull from this," Polina said to the printer. "It's been lying about for half a year unused."

The illustration met with general approval. Even the printer had a good word for it and pulled several copies for himself on art paper.

Polina started making up the second page, squabbling all the time with Vanya, who was in difficulties about cutting an over-long article on new books in the library. He urged Polina to reduce the size of type in the headlines.

"If you make it smaller we'll get everything in," he argued. "It's absolutely impossible to cut this."

"Obviously," said Polina caustically. "If it was about anything else but the library, you'd soon find something to cut."

Taking advantage of his impartial position, Andrei took a pencil and slashed a whole paragraph. It made Vanya wince but Polina gave a smile of satisfaction and in a flash lifted the deleted lines out of the form.

"That's perfect. And you thought we should reduce the headlines! Girls," she turned to the trainees, "you can knock off now."

Then she suddenly remembered herself.

"I'm sorry, Comrade Korolev. I quite forgot that I'm a visitor here."

"I'd be glad if you agreed to stay and take charge," said Andrei. "Tomorrow morning I'm going straight to your chief to try and capture you from him."

"I wish you luck," said Polina with a fetching smile, and at once set about tidying up the print-shop with the two girls. Rolling up her sleeves and tucking up her frock, she dusted the tables, swept the floor and put some order into a pile of useless packing cases in one of the corners. Even the printer did not escape—she made him carry the cases outside.

Polina fixed a strong lamp into a socket and made a large shade for it out of paper. The print-shop at once became spacious and light.

"Now we can work," she said with satisfaction. "With all that rubbish lying about, the place didn't look like a print-shop."

Andrei and Vanya were reading the proofs and the printer was about to set his machine running when into the office hurried Voronkova.

"Excuse me, Andrei Borisovich—er, Comrade Korolev," she began hurriedly. "I do hope I'm not too late. Is there still time to do something? Went clean out of my head. Remembered it only when I got home. He told me to give it you this morning. Brought it to my room himself. . . . Oh, I'll catch it."

She handed Andrei an envelope and went on to say that Stoletov had brought it to her that morning before leaving with the factory manager. There was an article in it. He had asked her to take it to the editorial office at once with the message that if the article was considered suitable it should be published in the next number of *Tribuna*.

"It's too late anyway," said Vanya angrily. "Look, the paper's in proof. Where do you think we're going to print it?"

"We'll find room for it," said Andrei who had run his eyes over the article. "Thanks, Masha."

It was an open letter to the editor of the paper about Kovalev's invention. It told briefly what kind of a machine it was and how it could be used. It concluded with an appeal to the factory manager and the chief engineer: "It is high time that the management paid some attention to this invention of Engineer Kovalev's and raised with the Ministry the question of including it in the production plan. Our comrade has invented a machine that can contribute much to the national economy, as is proved by the countless documents and reports of its performance."

The letter was signed by a number of designers, including the chief of the designing office. Underneath, Stoletov had written: "Andrei Borisovich! There's no need to publish all the letters but, if you can, publish this one. I shall try to get you a reply from the factory manager and the chief engineer."

Andrei drew his pencil through Stoletov's note and handed the sheets to Polina.

"Can you manage this?"

"Must, if it's needed. Tamara, set this headline. Get a move on, now. Take a note of it: 'Forgotten Invention'—and underneath in smaller type: 'Letter to the Editor.' Don't worry, Andrei Borisovich, it will be ready in a quarter of an hour. . . . You work out what we ought to scrap to make room for the article. It'll take forty lines."

"We'll have to kill the item about new books," said Andrei, "It's just forty lines."

He ran his pencil through the article; Vanya sighed and shook his head. Back into stock. He could just hear Lusya, the chief librarian, saying disdainfully: "Your promises are not to be taken seriously. You're not reliable; you've no authority." But what could he do if the article about Kovalev's invention was really more interesting than the list of the latest books?

Page two, with the new article in its place, was locked up again; the printer switched on and the first copies of the edition began to flutter from the press with a soft rustling sound. It was quite a modest sheet—two pages—but its birth was an event; tomorrow it would reach the public and arouse various emotions, thoughts, actions.



Andrei walked out of the print-shop; alone, quite alone in his office, he read through the whole edition once more, from the title to his signature at the bottom of the last column. His was the responsibility for everything that appeared in the paper, the responsibility that no single word had been written in vain.

How many more editions would it be his lot in life to pass for publication? Many, no doubt, but he would never forget this modest factory newspaper. He would remember every detail: the green, cracked lampshade on his desk, the noise of the press in the next room, the tired faces of

Polina and Vanya and his own keen longing to share his excitement with someone. . . .

"Dad," he wrote in the margin of the newspaper. "I put out this edition today. Do read it. I'm well and happy. Andrei."

He folded the paper into an envelope and addressed it to the house and street in Moscow where he was born and grew up.

The printer soon completed the whole run: the press behaved itself, everything was ship-shape, the newspapers lay in neat white piles in the brightly lit print-shop. Andrei shook hands with the printer, switched out the light, locked the door and went outside. The dark warm night closed about him. A shooting star described an arc on the sky and vanished somewhere behind the mountains. A cool breeze off the lake fanned Andrei's flushed face. The world was vast and kind; it felt good to be alive.

*Bu'lgaria's a marvellous land
But Russia's best of all. . . .*

he sang quietly and then suddenly stopped: someone was walking across the square in his direction. He could hear slow, dragging steps on the asphalt.

"Is that you, Andrei?" The voice was low. "Where've you been all this time? I waited and waited. . . ."

"I was putting out the paper. Here's a copy for you."

"Ah," said Nikolai, breathing heavily. "Let me see. . . ."

He grasped Andrei's arm and walked beside him. Nikolai's arm was heavy, the arm of a very tired man; Andrei looked in alarm at his face—in the darkness it looked drawn, the eyes sunken, the edges of his mouth drooping.

"Aren't you feeling well, Nikolai? What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter" muttered Nikolai and, lurching suddenly, almost fell on Andrei. "Nothing special, that is. . . ."

Andrei steadied his companion. He caught a strong whiff of vodka.

"Hello, hello," he said, his hand tightening on Nikolai's elbow. "Are you tight?"

"I am. What's that got to do with you?"

The tone was challenging. Nikolai straightened his shoulders and made an effort to walk in step with Andrei. But again he staggered and clung to Andrei's arm.

"I can't understand why I feel like this," he babbled. "I drank much less than Yasha. . . . You despise me, I know. All right, I don't care." His breathing was heavy, he put all his weight on Andrei's arm. "I came for you. For you, understand? The boys are waiting for me. I promised to bring you."

Another star streaked across the sky; from the roadside pines came a warm scent of resin; there were lights in the windows; the whole world was beautiful—but Andrei felt dismayed.

He led Nikolai on in silence, paying no attention to his drunken drivel, ignoring his questions.

"Are you coming?" Nikolai asked him. "You ought to, you know. They're expecting us. They'll be offended. Me, too. . . ."

He tried to turn aside but Andrei led him firmly back towards the Stalingrad. As they passed the corner of the building, Andrei dropped the letter to his father in the letter-box.

"Writing letters, eh?" said Nikolai with a laugh. "I've no time for letters. . . . We on the production side have to work, you know. You look down on fellows who work in the shop, don't you? You refuse to drink with us."

"Yes, I do refuse to drink—with you," said Andrei sharply.

He dragged the reeling Nikolai up the stairs from landing to landing. Neither of them spoke as they went up, but once in their room, Andrei grasped Nikolai by the shoulders and shook him hard.

"What d'you think my father would say to this? He's a production worker, too, by the way. D'you think he'd commend you for being in this filthy state? Tight, befuddled, can't even stand on your own legs. Who've you been drinking with? What did you have to do it for?"

"I've been drinking with my turners." The strong light made Nikolai frown. "Good fellows. . . . Had to treat them, you know. It's a tradition. . . . a workers' tradition, you see. The foreman's supposed to treat his men."

His legs gave way and he flopped on to the edge of his bed. He felt sick, his boyish face was pale, his hair stuck clammily to his forehead, his shirt collar was undone, revealing a thin youthful neck.

He kept up his blustering; his tongue ran on trying to find excuses for his conduct.

"There's a turner called Yasha in my section, you see. He's a splendid fellow, really splendid but he has family troubles. He told me I ought to push the boat out. He insisted, you understand? We asked the Comsomol organizer, too. At first he didn't want to come, but in the end he came. It's the one who plays the trombone, d'you remember? He's also got family trouble. . . . We had a drink and a fine talk. I wanted you to be there so I came for you. Why are you so angry about that?"

"Tradition!" Andrei said derisively. "That's a rotten tradition, the tradition of pub-crawlers and boozers. Oh, Nik, Nik. You're making a pretty poor start on your independent life."

Nikolai listened but his eyelids drooped and he made several moves to lie down. There was a guilty smile on his lips. At length he rocked once more, stretched his legs and lay down on the white counterpane.

"Now that's really swinish," Andrei jerked him to his feet. "You go and take a shower and don't forget your soap and towel."

Nikolai picked up his towel obediently and followed Andrei to the bathroom. Sasha, the warden, handed them the key but warned them that there was no hot water.

"All to the good," said Andrei. "The colder the better."

Turning on the tap till the shower stung his hands, he pushed Nikolai under its jets. Nikolai started back but Andrei held him under the cruel, ruthless stream. He stood beside Nikolai shouting when the water whipped his back with its icy lashes.

"Doesn't it feel good?" he cried, shoving Nikolai right under the shower. "Come on, a bit longer. Let it wash the booze out of you. Keep your head up. It's the only cure for you."

As he rubbed himself down with a towel, Andrei took a hard look at Nikolai. He saw his expression turn from injury to anger; he saw him draw himself up, and start slapping himself all over his pink body; he saw a gleam return to his eyes and a smile to his lips.

"Coming round, eh?" he asked when Nikolai shook himself and ran from under the shower. "Just look at him. Now he looks like a human being again and not like a blue corpse pulled out of a river. Feel hungry? I do."

"I could eat something," said Nikolai.

He dressed, watching Andrei who by then was combing his dark curly hair in front of a mirror. How neat and straight the parting ran from his temple, how well-cut and smooth the hair was at the back of the neck. His own hair was almost long enough to wear in plaits. Nikolai touched his nape. Why was it that Andrei never forgot to have his hair cut?

They had some supper at a small table, which they pulled up to the open window. Below them the whole settlement slept in darkness. There was not a sound except from far away a sad melody sung in a high lingering voice to the strains of an accordion.

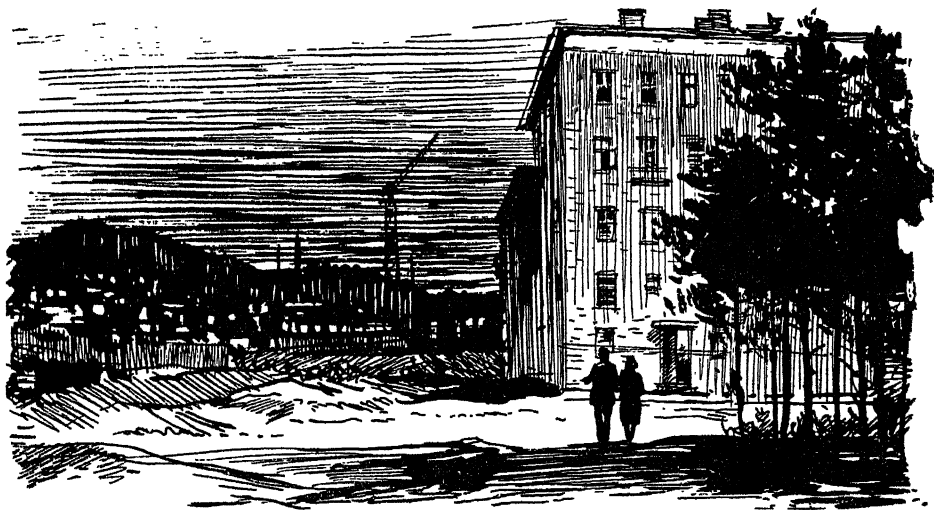
"Feel like sleep?" asked Andrei. "I don't. Now tell me how it all happened and what those tragedies of yours are."

(to be concluded)

Translated by R. P.

Illustrations by V. Bogatkin





YELENA KATERLI

The Long Road

Chapter Seven

1

ONE evening Stepan Stoletov and his wife Varya went for a stroll before going to bed. They did not get far, however. As they passed the block of flats where Kovalev lived, Stoletov noticed a light burning in his flat and suggested to Varya that they should call on him.

"Isn't it a bit late?" said Varya. "He may've gone to bed."

"I don't think so. Look, the light's on."

Stoletov turned out to be right. Kovalev opened the door almost before the bell had stopped ringing. He stood on the threshold and made no move to invite his callers in. They might have been strangers to him, so unfriendly was his expression. Stoletov, however, gave no signs of noticing anything odd in the other's manner, stepped forward and drew Varya with him.

"We saw your light burning," he said. "So we decided to drop in."

For a moment Kovalev hesitated. Then he flung open a door which led not into his study but into another room. He switched on the light; the glare of the unshaded bulb revealed a round dining-table, a sideboard with glass-fronted and quite empty cupboards, uncurtained windows and a piano with a dusty top.

The first part of *The Long Road* appeared in the previous issue.

The room had a chilly, musty air; Kovalev opened a French window on to a balcony; the warm, scented night flowed in.

"It's a long time since I used this room," he said with a rueful smile. "I'm sorry, it looks a bit desolate...."

He waved his visitors to chairs and left the room. Varya wiped the dust from a chair with her handkerchief and looked around. She was somewhat put out.

"I don't like this place, Stepan," she whispered. "Let's go home, please."

But Stoletov only smiled, and began pacing up and down the room. He had decided he would not let Kovalev's churlishness drive him away. Why, though, were they being kept out of the study? And where on earth had the man got to?

The door opened and Kovalev came in. He was carrying a large tray with cups, a box of chocolates and a plate of biscuits on it.

He put the tray on a chair, flung a cloth over the table, laid the cups on it and opened the box of chocolates which he pushed towards Varya.

"Sit down, Stepan Demyanovich," he said. "The kettle will be on the boil in a moment. We'll have tea."

Varya peeped into the box with childlike curiosity. It was full of prettily wrapped sweets and miniature liqueur bottles covered with silver paper.

"Here's one for you," said Stoletov, indicating a chocolate in the shape of a tiny fiddle; but Varya stood up, opened the piano and ran her fingers up and down the keyboard. The piano was of excellent tone, a little muffled perhaps, but that may have been because the lid was down.

As she played, Varya heard her husband talking, and she glanced over her shoulder.

"I shall send him a telegram before the end of this week," he was saying. "You may have given in but I'm damned if I'm going to."

Stoletov caught Varya's eye and signed to her to go on playing.

"I've been fed up with the whole thing for a long time," said Kovalev. "I don't know all the facts but I've a feeling there's something fishy going on that's holding things up. I'm not prepared to go on fighting with shadows. What's the sense in the factory paper writing about something the factory itself can't settle, even if it wanted to."

Varya stopped listening. She struck a loud chord and broke into a waltz—a gay, tripping, carefree melody. Little bells seemed to tinkle as her right hand ran up the keyboard. And only then did she realize how dull and empty life was for her without a piano. She was accustomed to sitting for hours on end at one.

"Bureaucrats aren't immovable obstacles," Varya heard her husband say. "It won't take real people long to clear the way—you'll see."

"I've lost too much in life on account of that 'sand shrew' of mine, I tell you. I don't intend to be a slave to it any longer. Let's go into the other room. I've a few papers to show you. They'll give you some idea of the way the thing came into existence."

Stepping carefully so as not to disturb Varya, they went into Kovalev's study. Kovalev opened a drawer in his desk and took out a large faded photograph.

"There I am with my first excavator. Some newsreel operators took the picture. They made me a present of it. Good fellows they were, too. I'm friendly with one of them up to this day."

The photograph showed a young man holding a spade, well to the foreground. He was standing on a high mound of sand. The wind played with his hair, the sun lit up his happy, smiling face. In the background yawned the foundation pit of a building site. On the bottom of this large oval saucer and on plank gangways along its sides hundreds of wheelbarrows were being pushed; the navvies, each with a spade in his hand, worked shoulder to shoulder; at the far end of the pit a small mechanical shovel lifted its short jib.

"That's where my working days began, Stepan Demyanovich."

Many years had passed since that photograph was taken, but Kovalev had not forgotten working beside his fellow-navvies in that pit, shovelling the sifting yellow sand. They thought they were working fast. Every movement was carefully calculated, the spades were chosen with particular care—and how they used to argue about those spades, the one and only implement for digging, it seemed to them!

Kovalev, like everyone else, had his favourite spade. He used to bring it with him from work and keep it under his bunk in the hostel so that no one else would get hold of it. But his affection for his spade was short-lived—it died on the day when, having some time off, he walked across to the other side of the pit where a puzzling object like a girder on a railway-bridge rose above the pit. He glanced at this object with no particular interest. Then he saw it move and bend over the pit. It hung motionless for a few moments, then raised itself and swung to one side, carrying with it a large scoop from which a thin stream of sand trickled. Then the scoop opened like a bird's claw and released a barrow-load of sand into the back of a lorry which was standing beside it. The jib moved to and fro a few more times and the lorry moved off fully laden, making way for another. And again the scoop flashed its steel fangs, made a rattling sound and dropped into the pit for another load.

Kovalev was spellbound by this powerful piece of machinery which was able in one operation to shift a whole barrow-load of earth. At the controls sat a nondescript-looking man in blue overalls. He moved something and the scoop dropped smoothly into the pit, dug steadily into the sand and, as the jib swung, slowly returned with its load to the lorry.

Kovalev remained standing beside the machine until the end of the shift. He learned from a lorry-driver who was awaiting his turn that the scoop could take almost a cubic metre of earth at a time and that if more such machines were available, the excavation work would have been finished long ago.

"You'll not shift that earth with spades before the hay comes home," said the lorry-driver. "Like a lot of beetles digging, you are."

"But why is there only one machine working here? They ought to be here by the dozen."

"So *you* think! Where d'you think they come from? That's a foreign make. Paid for in foreign currency. It's called a 'Marion.' But there's plenty of fellows like you. Look at 'em all dashing about over there. And if needs be as many more will come." The man's tone was churlish. He drove his lorry forward to take his place under the scoop.

Kovalev sat down on the warm sand and went on watching the excavator. But soon afterwards it broke down; there was a harsh grating sound, the jib faltered, then stopped half-way. The operator clambered down from his cabin and started repairing the machine. He tinkered with the engine for a long time, then, pulling his cap down hard, went away.

Kovalev expected to see mechanics come dashing up at once to get the mighty "Marion" back on the job. But no one came and the machine stood useless for the rest of the shift. Kovalev was shocked.

From that day the young navy kept a jealous eye on the work of the excavator. It stood idle for long periods; this, the operator explained, was because the machine had a work norm which was written in its "passport"; according to this norm it had the right to stand idle and, this being so, the supervisor did not worry about it and made no effort to get it repaired quickly when it broke down.

"Works for an hour and then knocks off for three. She's a finicky old girl. She doesn't like to work too hard. . . Gets all kinds of favours from the supervisor."

Those "favours" were extended to "Marion's" operator too. When the machine broke down for a long spell, he would calmly go off home or take a boat out on the broad placid river.

One evening, when Kovalev was sitting on the porch at the hostel, he saw this operator beckoning to him from the road.

"Doing anything, Kovalev? What d'you say to a row?"

Near the ferry landing-stage the excavator-operator went up to a slim, lightly-built wherry with a bored young man in a new saffron shirt sitting at the oars.

"Let's go," said the operator as he stepped into the boat.

"Where to?" the boatman asked as he cast off. "'Cross to the other side or for a trip?"

"Let's go for a trip. It's a grand evening. Just right to take the girls out."

The boat glided along close to the bank. The trees bent low at that place and below them the water looked quite black. A damp, grassy scent came from the bank; somewhere a night-jar uttered a long drawn-out cry; mossy old tree-stumps thrust their weird shapes out over the river; the broad leaves of water-lilies rustled against the sides of the boat.

Kovalev dipped his hand into the inky water, grasped a cold white flower and plucked it, bringing up with it a long flexible stalk.

"A water-lily," said the excavator-operator. "I don't know a lovelier flower."

He snatched off his cap. There was a gleam of inspiration in his eyes. He looked Kovalev straight in the face.

"Man was created for beauty, you know, Kovalev. Look at that flower. It exists for man. Admire it, give it to your sweetheart, keep it in your room. Now, song, too—that's also something to make life more beautiful."

And thereupon he sang in an unexpectedly high, resonant voice:

*Down in the valley
On a smooth little mound
An old oak tree
Casts its branches around. . .*

The sun was rising when they got back to the building site. Dense clouds of moths hung over the water, they fell to the ground, were crunched underfoot. Their life was brief—a few hours in all.

"Now, man's given a long time to live," said the excavator-operator, removing a grey moth from his boot; its wings were still fluttering. "And it's up to man to take as much as he can from life—yes, and give something to others, too. Take you, for instance. You're strong and healthy. You've a long life ahead of you. See that you make it a fine one. But who's going to help you do that? No one."

"What about you?"

"No, I'm not. I'm a man of whims. I live as my fancy moves me. Today I like you, tomorrow I won't be able to stand the sight of you. One day I work like fury, the next I drop everything and go off to another job. So don't count on me. Use your own wits. There's one thing I can do for you, though. Would you like to work as my mate? I'll teach you everything. You're one that ought to be taught. You love machines. What d'you say?"

"I'm game. I'll be grateful to you all my life."

"Grateful? What for? I've taken a fancy to you. You've got happy-looking eyes and you're high-spirited. Nothing'll come out of the mate I've got now. He's got a sour nature and shows it, too. I'll have a word with the supervisor tomorrow. Then it'll be up to you whether you make a man out of yourself or stay being a worm. I believe in you; you're not the sort to let a fellow down. One day, maybe, you'll spare a kind thought for me. And if you don't, well, I don't care. I'm not doing this for your gratitude, I'm doing it to please my fancy."

Arseni Mikhailovich Kovalev, one-time navvy, paced his study with even strides. It was growing light outside. Stoletov sat near the desk. From the next room came the strains of music.

"That man kept his word," Kovalev went on, "I became his mate. Then I took over the excavator myself. Two years later the Comsomol recommended me for study at a workers' evening school. It nearly made me cry to part with my machine. I was quite in love with it, almost as if it were a living creature. You see, it had given me strength and power. When I left I promised the boys I would go on learning until I knew how to build machines like that. I wanted there to be a lot of them. I wanted to see them used on every building job, replacing manual labour on the heaviest work."

In the light of early dawn Kovalev looked almost youthful; his hair was not so much grey as bleached by the sun. His voice rang with excitement. He strode to the desk and pulled out another photograph: it showed a group of young men standing around an excavator, among them Kovalev. He looked more grown-up than in the first picture; this time he was wearing dark overalls instead of the embroidered shirt. His hand rested on the rail of the operator's cab. All the young men looked very serious. It was a farewell gathering photographed at the hour of Kovalev's departure.

"That was our Comsomol secretary," Kovalev said, touching the picture. "And this lad was my mate. The rest were the navvies I started with. I promised them to study so they'd each have a machine to handle instead of a spade. Maybe that childish pledge sounds funny, but for many a year it

was my guiding star. And in trying to fulfil it I've sacrificed a great deal . . . including my personal happiness."

He tossed the photograph back on to the desk, went to the window and lighted his pipe. A cloud of tobacco smoke drifted over his shoulder into the room.

Stoletov looked at the photographs—at the one of the young man with a spade, then at the same young man with the excavator against a background of metal framework rising on the building site, then his glance strayed to the photograph in the frame which he had seen before. The photograph showed a woman with a girl beside her. The withered leaf had been removed so that both faces could be seen now and the frame stood in the middle of the desk.

"If a man can preserve the romanticism of his youth until his hair turns grey, it becomes something sacred," said Stoletov, moving the photographs aside. "You must keep that romanticism, Arseni Mikhailovich. Keep it and fight for it. Wait just a little longer, we'll see that 'shrew' of yours yet."

Kovalev shrugged. Wait? Yes, he could wait. He could put his blue prints away somewhere safe. But he could not fight. He had no more strength for that. He had given notice that he intended to take his holidays, and very soon he would be going away for a month. He had not yet made up his mind where to go. Anywhere a long way off would suit him.

Varya came to the door. She looked pale and tired.

"I'm sorry, I drove you out with my playing," she said.

As if guarding some other person's secret, Stoletov laid a sheet of drawing-paper over the photographs. Then he walked up to Varya.

"You played very nicely, dear," he said. "Now let's go home and let Comrade Kovalev get some sleep."

When he had seen his visitors off, Kovalev returned to his study and drew an unfinished letter out of a drawer. He moved his papers aside and placed the letter in front of him to add a few lines:

"I shall wait for you there all month. Come, and bring Tatyana. Let us try to rebuild our life together. I have waited so long—surely my hopes will not be disappointed this time. I have gained control of myself, I shall do just as you wish, but I cannot go on living without you and Tatyana. I send you my kisses, my beloved. Your Arseni."

He closed the envelope, and, as if afraid he might have second thoughts, went out at once and posted his letter.

2

Andrei was extremely interested to learn what impression had been made by the letters from the oil workers and the designers published in *Tribuna*. He went to the workshops early that morning, only to find everybody busy with his own affairs, and copies of the paper lying about unfolded and obviously unread.

In one shop he ran across Vanya Poperechny. Vanya, too, was trying to find out the reaction to the letter though he pretended to be deep in conversation with some high-speed turners about their methods. Andrei walked past him, frowning. He did not want Vanya to notice his disappointment.

Andrei returned to his office in a bad humour. On the bench sat a young man with a white bandage round his neck and a patch of pink plaster on one cheek. He clutched a sheet of paper on which something was written in pencil.

"I'm off work today. Not feeling well," the man said hoarsely. "I read the paper at the polyclinic. Here's my reply to the oil workers. Please print it in the paper."

He handed Andrei his message. It said that the writer pledged himself to double his daily quota of work so that the oil workers could get new houses quickly. The grammar was rather shaky. The language, however, was quite high-flown.

"Deeply conscious of the profound importance to the state of what you are doing and of your appeal to our youth . . . never having seen an oil gusher but realizing its deep significance, I give my oath and pledge to raise the banner of labour to its full height. . . ."

"Needs tidying up a bit," said Andrei brightly, looking at the young man who was sprawling on the bench. "Should be shorter, more concrete. Where d'you work?"

"In the chief mechanic's department," the reply came grudgingly. "Repairing machine-tools. What do you mean, more concrete? Two hundred per cent—look, there it is."

"But are you sure the machines you'll be repairing are working on that oil job?"

"We work where we're sent. It's our job to do the repairs in time. What the machines are working on isn't our business."

The man spoke with a sneer: here's a chap sitting in an office and doesn't understand a thing. Nagging away about silly little things—where do you work, how do you work? As if that's what mattered. The main thing was the two hundred per cent. That was the stuff. Let all the boys in the shop read that, specially the foreman. The foreman would go off the deep end when he read that in the newspaper. He was always swearing and cursing and then—whang! There would be this pledge in the paper.

But Andrei went on asking him questions. How was his work up to now? What machine-tools had he repaired? When did he leave trade school? What was the matter with his neck?

"Oh, that's nothing," the fellow growled in answer to the last question. "Got a boil, so I had a bandage put on."

"Is that a boil on your cheek, too?"

"No, I got hurt."

"D'you belong to the Comsomol?"

"Why, d'you have to be in the Comsomol to write in the paper, or what?"

Andrei was finding the fellow less and less to his liking; sprawling there, with his cap on, his face all swollen. So insolent too. Got off work for a mere boil on the neck. He'd obviously been in a scrap—there was an ugly bruise under the eye close to the pink plaster. All the same, Andrei felt reluctant to reject the first response to the oil workers' letter.

"Listen," he said, putting the note aside, "come to see me tomorrow evening. We'll see what other replies we get and then decide which ones to print; the rest we'll use some other way. Oh yes, one thing more. Do

you think we could organize a special young workers' team in the chief mechanic's department? Maybe you could add that idea to your letter?"

"That's for the foreman to say. What's the good of thinking about it? Our job's to work, not to think. Don't you know the saying? There was once a cock that thought and thought and thought and then it croaked."

Without another word the young man left the office. Andrei noticed the way Valya glared at him as he went out.

"Know him?" Andrei asked her.

"I certainly do. Too well," said Valya. "If I'd had my way I'd never have let him see you, but how are you to turn a fellow with his nerve away? He's lazy, he's a disgrace to the whole shop, and, what's more, he's a rowdy, too...."

Valya noisily snatched a sheet of paper out of her typewriter: she had made mistakes in the article she had been typing when that fellow was in the office. Now she would have to retype it. Did Andrei really mean to accept that letter? Nothing in the world would make her defile her typewriter by copying out those lies. Doubling his quota, indeed! A fellow who never reached his quota as it was....

Andrei slipped the letter into his pocket. So the first reaction to the oil workers' appeal was unacceptable. Never mind, he would wait; perhaps decent people, too, would notice the letter from Bashkiria. But there was no further response, although, when Andrei met Lyuba, she assured him that the newspaper had given rise to some talk in the shops. Lyuba suggested they should "organize" a response by talking to people and making a note of their opinions. Andrei, however, declared that he would not do that sort of thing again—let people learn to write for themselves.

Lyuba decided to lose no more time; she would have the letter discussed by the Comsomol activists. She at once set out round the shops, inviting all who wished to come and join in a discussion. The invitation was quite straightforward but accompanying it was the vague promise that there would be something interesting after the meeting—a new picture or a concert.

"But there's not going to be a concert," Stoletov protested. He had overheard Lyuba exercising her powers of persuasion on an assembly worker from the chief mechanic's department. "Why are you fooling people?"

"Maybe we shall have a concert, maybe we shan't," Lyuba replied enigmatically. "Unless I promise them something, nobody'll turn up except members of the committee."

Whether it was Lyuba's powers of persuasion or the hope of seeing a new picture that brought people, but the meeting was well attended. A crowd gathered in the corner of the factory yard generally used as a volley-ball court. A table and some chairs were brought for the chairman and the platform party; the others had to sit on the ground.

Both the factory manager and Stoletov were there. They arrived with a few more of the "old brigade" such as Syurtukov, Yelena Protasova and Poteryayev the pattern-maker. These older people sat a little apart on a garden bench and here, after a little hesitation, Andrei joined them.



"We were grubbing up tree roots just here when we came across some gold-prospecting tools," the factory manager said. "They were all rusty and corroded by age. What those prospectors could have been looking for here, or what they found, no one knows. There were some geologists working with us then and they said there was absolutely nothing here to look for."

"Geologists!" said Syurtukov. "Those old gold prospectors didn't have geologists to help them. They worked haphazardly, by observation. My father did a bit of prospecting in his time. He always dreamed of finding an emerald as big as a cat's eye or a nugget as big as two fists. But there wasn't much to be found—only one in a thousand made his fortune."

"I had a stroke of luck once," said Poteryayev. "Found a Siberian ruby. A big one, too. Got what was a lot of money in those times for it. Didn't last long, though. I went to town and soon drank it up. I was young then, of course, different from what I am now."

"And I'm no different, praise the Lord," said Syurtukov. "The girls've still got an eye for me—Dusya's friends—though I'm a grandfather."

"H'm, I bet the girls had more than an eye for you forty years ago," laughed Budanov. "Well, you've still got a twinkle in your eye. What a man! All the same, you've got one old man's habit—you like to talk about the past."

"It isn't a habit, it's a pedagogical method. See what I was—see what I am. Get what I mean? Nowadays our smart youngsters start criticizing everything as soon as they see God's light. There's nothing you don't hear them asking for—asphalt pavements in the village streets, fountains in the park, brighter street lighting. Too dark for them to go walking-out by, mark you! 'Fraid of mixing the girls up. They're not even interested to know that the forest covered these parts ten years ago."

"He's right, this was virgin forest then," said the factory manager. "My boy was keen on photography in those days and he took pictures of beauty spots and our first houses and workshops. It's interesting to look at them now..."

He broke off, not telling them that after his son's death he had gone on taking photographs himself to complete the album, with pictures of each new shop and house carefully pasted in with the date.

The hand-bell was being rung. Lyuba Zvonaryeva was summoning everybody to the meeting from her high perch on a tree-stump. The public, mostly Comsomol members, sat round about on the dusty, trampled grass. Everybody was laughing and talking loudly; Andrei was afraid the meeting was going to turn out badly—it looked more like a party than a serious gathering.

"Let's go and sit on the grass, too," Syurtukov suggested. "Nearer to the masses."

He winked at the factory manager but Budanov kept to his seat on the bench a little apart. Stoletov, however, moved to the grass. Andrei went and sat beside him and looked round for Nikolai. He saw him standing next to Dusya. Dusya was wearing a smart frilly frock. She was looking at Nikolai archly as she spoke to him.

But where was Dusya's husband? Ah, there he was at the chairman's table, with Valya sitting next to him with paper and ink-pot before her.

Lyuba opened the meeting. "We're not going to have a report. I'll say just a few words and then we'll open the discussion. There's one thing seriously wrong about the way we work. The trouble is we don't know who we're working for. A chap makes something but he doesn't know who or what he's making it for. Of course, I agree that we ought to work conscientiously on every order, whatever it is. But all the same we must know who we're working for. Other factories do. They know when they're working for some big construction scheme, for one of the People's Democracies, for China, for Moscow. After all, an order's not just an order, there's a political side to it; it has something in it to inspire us in our work. But that, I'm sorry to say, is not the way with us. Only our designers and, of course, the factory manager, know where the stuff we're making goes to. We in the factory are kept in complete ignorance about it."

Shouts arose from all over the gathering.

"Part number seventeen," someone shouted. "Guess what it is!"

"Like a crossword puzzle. Work it out for yourself. Solution in the next issue."

"No, there's no solution. Your guess is as good as any other."

Lyuba clanged the bell.

"Quiet, please. Everyone will have a chance to speak later. Don't interrupt."

"Take my name. I want to speak."

"So do I. Let me speak first. I've got to get away."

The hubbub grew. Lyuba flung her hands up in protest.

"Quiet," she cried. "Send your names up, but don't yell. Where's your sense of discipline? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. In front of older comrades, too."

But the "older comrades" were not at all put out by the din. Stoletov was shouting himself. Syurtukov laughed. The factory manager was the only one who kept his dignity. He looked somewhat disgruntled.

"Well, to proceed," said Lyuba when order had been restored. "That's how it is: we want to know who we're working for, where the production of the different shops is going and what it's to be used for. The manage-

ment ought to keep us informed about such matters. . . . The work will be more interesting for us then. Now, let's have a look at this letter from the oil workers. I went through the shops today to find out what the present position is. I'm going to tell you about that now. Then we'll discuss what can be done to get a move on with that order and we'll send a reply to the letter from the factory youth."

Lyuba had a voice that carried well; and what extraneous sounds there were did not lessen its effect. A keen ear could have picked up many such sounds, however. A lorry drove up to the factory gates and hooted insistently to be let in. The gates opened with a shrill squeal—how on earth could the gate-keepers stand it? Why didn't they oil the hinges? Swifts darted with a swoosh over Lyuba's head. Large flocks of them described circles against the pale sky as they chased gnats. The local goods-train uttered its thin cuckoo-calls as it dragged its wagon-loads of bricks to the site of the new apartment house.

Every time the locomotive whistled, Andrei looked round in vexation. What did it think it was doing, interrupting Lyuba like that? But Lyuba went on addressing the meeting, paying no attention whatsoever to the interruptions. And everybody who sat round her on the grass or on the benches listened to Lyuba and not to the railway engine or to the monotonous whine of an accordion repeating a single phrase again and again somewhere near by, or to the announcer's voice booming from a loud-speaker on the roof of the management offices.

"Now I want to hear what you think about the questions I've raised," Lyuba concluded. "Let me have your suggestions; we'll write them down for the resolution."

Lyuba jumped down from her perch and stood near the chairman's place. The setting sun played on her hair, on her animated face, on her shining eyes.

How lovely she is, thought Andrei. And she doesn't realize it, doesn't notice how everyone admires her. . . .

"I have a suggestion to make," said Vladimir Nazarenko, jumping on to the tree-stump that served as the rostrum.

Nazarenko was wearing an embroidered shirt. His blue jacket hung loosely over one shoulder. In his hand he held a thin switch stripped of its bark with a single green leaf at the tip.

"You laughed when we shouted that we weren't given jobs but cross-words to do," he began, hiding the switch behind his back. "But it really is important. For instance, I never knew that I was working on that order for the oil workers, nor did any of our chaps. I asked about it but nobody could say anything definite. If they'd known, of course they'd have done their best. I know I'm a member of the Comsomol committee and that means I'm responsible, but there are some older than me. Take the chairman of the factory trade-union committee over there. He's supposed to run Socialist emulation. But what does he do about it? He organizes a competition for the best pattern-maker or the best fitter, which only panders to personal vanity, but when it comes to trying to make people have a conscientious attitude to the work they're doing, it's not his business, apparently."

"What's wrong with you is you're sore you didn't get among the best turners," someone shouted.

"I'm not at all sore about it. There are people older than me who

work harder and deserve more. What makes me sore is the senseless way emulation is organized. Like a football match—all the cheers for the one who scores a goal.”

Nazarenko looked to see what he could do with his switch and laid it on the table right on top of the minutes book in which Valya was writing. Valya swept it angrily to the ground. There it was pounced on by some young lads. Nazarenko, meanwhile, stole a guilty look at Valya and drew a letter from his pocket.

“This is a letter I got from a friend,” he said. “He wrote from Ural-mash¹ and that means something. We were at trade school together and then he asked to be sent to Uralmash. My friend’s a Comsomol organizer. He’s giving us the benefit of his experience. Listen to this: ‘Our works have received an order for China. A Chinese representative visited us; he asked us to do the job fast and well. We Comsomol members have got people in every workshop and section seeing there are no bottle-necks. We keep our eyes open for rationalization proposals and see that they’re acted on. We got so many proposals that we even had to appoint someone in the designing office and in the chief technologist’s department to see that they were followed up. That order will be ready before delivery date and the quality of work will be first-rate. When you have time, come and see me. I’ll arrange for you to get into the works and I’ll show you everything. You can stay with me. . . .’”

While reading the letter, Nazarenko looked up several times to see whether people were listening. He could not make out at first whether they all were, but he saw that Stoletov was: his face was attentive and expressed approval. The factory manager, too, was listening. Was he interested? Hard to tell from his expression, but maybe he was. The chairman of the trade-union committee had turned his back. That didn’t matter. There ought to be an all-Union competition of chairmen of factory trade-union committees, and he ought to be made to compete.

“That’s what people are doing in other factories,” Nazarenko went on, putting the letter back into his pocket. “And what are we doing? Crossword puzzles and acrostics! We don’t pay enough attention to the order and, as a result, some people lose heart. Take our own section. Yesterday only three lathes were working. It was the same today. Why? Because those lathes are out of order, their wiring system needs overhauling. Our new foreman, Comrade Zhukov, doesn’t press hard enough. He asks politely for repairmen to be sent and they don’t come. I said to him: ‘At our place you’ve got to go for the repairers tooth and nail. If you’re polite with them you’ll wait two years.’ He told me he couldn’t do things that way. He’ll learn, of course. But in the meantime we need one of our Comsomol members to keep an eye on the chief mechanic’s department. I bet you we’d have got our repair men if we’d had the Comsomol on the job.”

“All the repair men are busy fitting up the new shop,” Syurtukov shouted, unable to contain himself. “Breakdown jobs aren’t in their plan of work. They have to sneak away as if they were doing it on the sly.”

“That’s just what I mean,” Nazarenko broke in. “Please put it down in the resolution. Then we’ll complete the oil workers’ order ahead of delivery date, and be proud to do it.”

¹ Urals Machine-Building Works.

Jumping down from the tree-stump, Nazarenko recovered his switch from the boy who had picked it up and sat down on the ground beside him. His speech had left him excited; he nudged his neighbour in the ribs, almost upset the chairman's table, and waved his switch at non-existent mosquitoes.

"Quiet, Nazarenko," said Lyuba sternly. "You weren't interrupted. Let others speak."

A foreman from the chief mechanic's department was speaking; he was a lanky, fair-haired man with a pale bored-looking face. He spoke in a dull, toneless voice, using stereotyped phrases.

"The complaint about unfulfilled repair work is quite unjustified," he drawled. "According to existing regulations the workshops should hand in written applications at the scheduled time for the repair work they need done."

"But our lathes don't break down 'at the scheduled time,'" Nazarenko shouted. "Don't you understand that?"

"Then the question is one of an unforeseen breakdown and, in that case, repair work may be delayed for an unspecified length of time. Applications must be made at the scheduled time for repair work and then...."

The man's voice floundered in a rising tide of noises. Some people coughed, others changed their places, others started talking to their neighbours. Even Stoletov bent his head to one side to listen to what Syurtukov was telling him—it must have been something amusing, for a smile played over Stoletov's lips.

Lyuba tapped the edge of the table with her pencil, she called for order, she even rang her bell, but the noise grew. No one was listening to the speaker, no one heckled him—his remarks aroused neither approval nor opposition.

"Your time's up," called Vanya Poperechny. "Are you going to stop or not?"

With much noisy argument a ruling on the length of speeches was given. Just then, however, the loud strains of an accordion were heard coming from somewhere near by. The music crashed out suddenly. Three young men appeared on the path. Yasha Milovidov was in the middle and it was he who was playing the accordion. His companions looked about them with truculent, arrogant expressions on their faces. They ignored the meeting, pretending they had not noticed it and were quite blind to their surroundings.

"Get the hell out of here or we'll throw you out," someone shouted at the intruders.

"Send for the fire brigade. They need the hose on them."

The next speaker climbed the tree-stump and stood waiting to start. Then he climbed down again sheepishly. Lyuba rang her bell but it sounded faint amidst the hubbub of voices and the strains of the accordion. Yasha went on playing, extracting the maximum volume of sound out of his instrument, while one of his companions sang a jingle at the top of his voice.

*When I took my accordion into battle,
The enemy fell down dead.
Toot-toot I'd play; trrt-trrt I'd rattle,
'Twas like a biff on the head.*

That voice was as piercing as a tin trumpet and every word reached the meeting. Someone found it amusing and laughed, but several others made a sudden rush for the path. Among them, Andrei noticed, was Nazarenko.

"Oh, they'll fight," shrieked Valya, scattering the sheets of paper on which she was keeping the minutes. "Look out, Yasha's carrying a knife, I know he is."

"Quiet, now," whispered Lyuba. "Don't start a panic."

Lyuba felt frightened herself, though she did not betray her feelings and did not even look towards the path.

"We'll carry on," she called during a brief lull in the shouting. "Who's next, comrades?"

The meeting proceeded. Syurtukov walked slowly to the chairman's table, brushed aside the young man who still stood undecidedly near the rostrum, and began to speak in a calm quiet voice:

"I don't think that the question before us today requires much special examination. Today we have to decide the principle of the thing: are we going to do what the oil workers have asked for or not? I think we can do it. . . . Not only can, but must do it. There's some time to be saved on that order, that's certain. We ought to ask the factory manager to draw up a revised production schedule. For every shop and section. Then everything will be all right."

"Of course there ought to be a new schedule, but we've a few complaints and suggestions to make. May I speak, please?" It was Lepikhin calling from the back of the meeting.

Dusya spoke after Lepikhin, and Budanov after her. The meeting went on normally. Valya, however, kept looking round nervously, peering at the shrubs to see what was happening on the path. But she could make nothing out: Yasha and his companions had been driven from the path down the slope. Muffled voices were heard, a few shrill notes on the accordion, and then silence, followed by a shriek and the sound of heavy footsteps on the dry earth as someone ran away.

They're fighting, Valya thought sadly. Whose was that shriek? Could it have been her Vladimir's? It didn't sound like him, or Yasha, for that matter.

Then, to her joy, she noticed Andrei and Vanya Poperechny get up quietly and slip away in the direction of the shouting.

Yasha and his pals would bolt now. Yasha would be afraid the editor would write about him in the paper. . . .

"Why aren't you keeping the minutes?" Lyuba asked her. "We're going to draw up a resolution on the basis of the minutes, you know. You've missed everything Dusya said."

"I'm sorry, Lyuba, don't be angry with me. I'll ask Dusya to tell me all she said. I'm worried about Vladimir."

She looked down and read the last note she had taken: "Lepikhin proposed that the experience of leading workers should be made more widely known. . . . Innovators' methods to be improved with something new every day. . . . Experience to be passed on efficiently. . . . A trip to Uralmash to study. . . ."

To study what? Valya's notes came to an end at that point; she had forgotten what Lepikhin had said. Was it something about mechanizing the moulding. Or was it something else? After a little reflection Valya

wrote "... the work of the best innovators." After all, what else could one learn from Uralmash?

A small committee was elected to collate the suggestions. Stoletov, in proposing Andrei, said:

"We ought to have the editor on it. And see that the paper gives us regular news about how work is proceeding on the oil workers' order in each shop."

Andrei got back to the meeting just in time to hear this remark. His hair was ruffled, his shirt collar undone, there were buttons missing from his jacket. As he hurried to his place he wiped his face with a handkerchief. Hearing Stoletov's words, he stopped behind the last row of the people sitting on the ground.

What chance had he of being elected? He was still quite an unknown quantity.

But he got on to the committee. The list of candidates was elected *en bloc*. Lepikhin was at once elected chairman and a motion was carried that the committee report to the Comsomol committee on the following day.

3

"Will members of our committee please not disperse," said Lepikhin in a loud voice. "Let's go over to my place. It's quiet there: we won't be disturbed and there'll be tea."

They all walked down the slope, crossed the stream and climbed up the other side towards a white building that lay among the pine trees. Darkness was falling and lights were going on in many windows. One light glimmered behind the tree trunks at the very top of the hill. That was where the Lepikhins lived.

"That's my eyrie," Lepikhin said to Andrei, pointing ahead. "And the missus is at home. That means tea. I had my eye on that place a long time before we moved in. I like it there—you get a good view all around."

They found Lepikhin's wife Maria sitting near the window with her chin in her hand, a thoughtful look on her face. She still wore her white doctor's cap over her dark curly hair. She did not hear the visitors arrive.

The room bore a faint resemblance to a hospital ward—perhaps because of the snow-white counterpanes on the beds, or because of the glossy white paint of the cupboards and shelves, perhaps because of the collection of glistening glass retorts on a dressing-table with a mirror. A shiny electric kettle bubbled like a sterilizer in an operating theatre. On the table the cups and the bread dish were covered by a starched napkin.

"Let's have a second kettle on," Lepikhin said to his wife. "There are a lot of us and we all want tea."

Maria cast a penetrating glance at each of them, shook hands and left the room. Her curt manner embarrassed the visitors slightly but Lepikhin remained as bright and talkative as ever. As he drew white stools up to the table ("We've no chairs. Haven't bought 'em yet"), he carefully turned over the edges of the white table-cloth ("So we shan't spill ink on it. Haven't bought a writing desk yet"); he pulled his notebook out of his pocket ("I made a note of all the suggestions. You can't rely on Valya's minutes").

But before he had time to open the notebook, Maria returned and placed a big mug of milk in front of him.

"Drink up your milk first," she said. "You forgot it again. I left the bottle in the larder. . . . Tea'll be ready for all of you in a minute. I've got another kettle on in the kitchen."

She returned to the window, called Lyuba Zvonaryeva over and whispered to her. Andrei strained his ears in vain to hear what she was saying. Lyuba spoke in a whisper too; when both women came to the table their faces were equally tense and secretive.

"Hello, what's up?" asked Lepikhin. "Are you all right?"

His voice expressed concern and alarm. But Maria only smiled and the smile gave her stern features an unexpectedly gentle expression. She was all right, she said. What had happened concerned somebody else. Who? What? Ah, those were doctor's secrets.

Besides Andrei, Lyuba and Lepikhin there were two others on the committee—Dusya Syurtukova and a tall young man whom Andrei had not met before—a filter from Shop No. 11. He, like Andrei, was visiting the Lepikhins for the first time and felt a little ill-at-ease. Not like Dusya, who, on arrival, had given Maria a peck on the cheek and passed on a greeting from her mother and little son, both patients of Maria's.

When Maria had satisfied herself that her husband had drained his mug of milk, she brought in the kettle, poured everyone a glass of strong tea. She sliced a loaf and brought butter and jam. Then she went back to her seat at the window.

"I'm a poor hostess," she said. "Help yourselves. If there isn't enough I'll bring some more. Drink your tea and eat up and don't pay any attention to me."

From her seat near the window she cast occasional glances at her husband. Andrei noticed how she partly closed the window when the cool evening breeze stirred the hair on Lepikhin's brow; he noticed too, how she got up to throw a jacket over his shoulders and the concern with which she studied his drawn, weary face.

Lepikhin thumbed through his notebook, turning down corners of the pages by some system known only to himself. He had made notes of all the most interesting suggestions and added his own views.

"I'll start by reading the suggestions according to the shops they came from," he said, gathering his notes together. "Then we'll get down to business."

He read out everything, not overlooking the smallest detail—a long list of names of machines, operations, workers and engineers. He had taken Budanov down almost verbatim. Among other things, the manager had promised to see that castings came in regularly for machining.

"Why, they're like shorthand minutes," chortled Dusya. "We had stenographers at the regional conference of the Comsomol last year. They wrote down all the speeches. Then they let me read what I'd said. My, I was surprised. Had I really talked in such a silly way? 'You see, comrades,' you see, comrades' after nearly every word. They'd written it all down."

The suggestions concerning work on the oil workers' order were soon collated and written down. Andrei was still at work on the preamble when Lepikhin was putting a full stop to the last paragraph of the resolution.

Lyuba gathered up the scribbled sheets and stuffed them in her bag—they would be typed by dinner break the next day.

"That's fine," she said. "We've got through it quickly and worked in all the details. It'll give us a plan of action with some guts in it."

"It's a very crude plan and there's nothing new in it," objected Lepikhin. "We've talked about practically all those things a hundred times already. Actually, they're the things that should be done whatever order we're working on."

Andrei stopped writing the preamble and listened to Lepikhin attentively. He liked this lean man with the quick, nervous gestures. It had never occurred to him to jot down everything of interest said at the meeting; he had been only half listening; he had run off after Yasha; his thoughts had wandered. Yet, as editor of *Tribuna*, he, more than anyone else, should have been listening to every sensible word that was spoken.

What had he been thinking about, he wondered. About how smart he had been to publish a letter that had aroused so much interest? About how pretty Lyuba looked? Yet, Lepikhin had not missed a single interesting point, and had criticized everything that needed to be criticized.

"When we're working on an order we ought always to keep in mind all the latest achievements in that sphere," said Lepikhin. "We must always keep on the track of creative ideas and not let them get away from us. The way we think now is this: We've been given wonderful machine-tools, marvellous cutting-tools, we're using the most up-to-date fast rotation methods, so let's use them to full capacity. But what we ought to be thinking is this: The machines are all right, so are the cutting-tools, the methods we use were not bad yesterday but aren't there better methods today?"

"That's all right, but where are those methods?" asked Dusya. "There are only three of us working on our welding set—me and my two assistants. True, a new fellow has joined us but there's nothing at all interesting about his methods."

She shrugged disdainfully: what new methods could she be expected to learn from that new fellow? But Lepikhin said that though he knew nothing whatever about welding sets he did not share Dusya's opinion that things could be learned only from one's own factory.

"D'you think I'm so daft as to think that," Dusya said. "I've been to other places, too. I've looked round for myself, taught others my own methods—nobody had caught me up."

She spoke with supreme assurance. Even when she had been visiting an aunt in the Ukraine and one of the family had taken her to his factory, she had noticed nobody working better than she did. Why, she had taught one girl there her own methods and the girl had been ever so grateful, she'd visited them several times afterwards.

"New, advanced methods don't always win through at once," said Lepikhin. "Take that invention of Kovalev's. There's a good thing all tied up in red tape that's now really hard to get untied. You were quite right to publish the designers' letter, Comrade Korolev, but it's not here in the factory that the brake's been put on, it's up there where our newspaper's never read."

"It's important to draw the factory manager and the chief engineer into the struggle for that excavator," said Andrei, delighted that Lepikhin had noticed the designers' letter. "Their support would mean a lot."

"I have my doubts whether their support will be very active. If they'd wanted to do anything about the matter, they'd have done it at the beginning. . . ."

The new clock on the wall struck ten, then half-past. Maria had cleared the table long ago, put the ink-pot away and smoothed the tablecloth. She kept on looking at her husband with increasing concern—how tired he must be—he had to be up early in the morning, and he still had his lesson with Ivan Konstantinovich.

Maria was deeply in love with her husband, but she still regarded him a little as a doctor regards a patient. She thought he neglected his health in some respects and was somewhat reluctant to keep to the regimen she had laid down for him. And now, when Lepikhin noticed her reproachful looks, he frowned, turned his back on her and pressed the others to stay whenever they showed signs of making a move.

Maria, however, found an ally in Ivan Konstantinovich. He appeared at the door, grasping his old brief-case and an intricately carved walking-stick—a gift from his grandchildren.

"I thought you wouldn't feel like coming to see me after work," the old man said, "so I decided to walk over myself. It's a fine evening. Been indoors all day. Glad to have a chance of stretching my legs."

It had been not quite like that. The old teacher had simply grown weary of waiting; and, grumbling to himself at his unpunctual pupil, had come to find him, not without a good deal of stumbling in the darkness. He had felt far from glad as he climbed the steep slope to the Lepikhins, and had been obliged to wait on the porch for a long while getting his breath back.

At last everybody got up and left. The evening was nothing like as fine as Ivan Konstantinovich had asserted—a mist had risen from the lake and the wind had got up, making the pine trees sway and moan. There was a rumble of distant thunder. It was pitch dark and Andrei had to offer his arm to Lyuba who tripped on the path at once. The tongue-tied fitter vanished without saying another word. Dusya grabbed Andrei's other arm.

"Let's see Lyuba home first," she said. "Then you can take me. I'm not going to the old village by myself, not me. And then you can see yourself home."

They walked down the steep slope, sending the gravel rattling down before them. The path had not been fully trodden down—the Lepikhins' house was new and its inhabitants had not yet had time to trample it hard.

"In the old village the roads are hard as rock," said Dusya as she stumbled on.

Dusya was in a good mood. She even hummed her favourite "Bird-Cherry" but neither of her companions joined in, so she began to pump Lyuba about what was worrying her.

"What was it Maria Lepikhina told you? Your face changed all at once. I saw it."

"Yes, she told me something very unpleasant."

"What was it, though? Unpleasant for whom? For you?"

"Yes, for me. As secretary of the Comsomol, I mean."

Lyuba fell silent again. That made Dusya angry. As a member of the Comsomol committee, she said, she had right of access to all information on matters concerning Comsomol members. Lyuba was wrong to keep everything to herself; she was snubbing the collective. To which Lyuba replied that she was not snubbing the collective but preferred to think things over for herself before talking about them.

"And as for you being a committee member, I advise you to pay some attention to the behaviour of the young people in the turnery."

When they reached her home, Lyuba curtly wished her companions good night, walked up to the front door and rapped on it hard.

"She thinks I don't know her secret," Dusya said immediately the door had shut behind Lyuba. "There's not a secret in the place I don't know. I come from here. I've got friends everywhere. I know Lyuba's secret all right."

"Why were you pestering her for it then?"

"I wanted to hear it from her. I wanted to know how she looks at the whole affair. Well, if she doesn't want to tell, I don't care. You see, Lyuba's secret's been sitting in our house since this morning."

Dusya was easier to handle than Lyuba, so without any more ado, Andrei asked how a secret could sit in anybody's house. Then Dusya explained that the secret consisted of a factory girl who had tried to drown herself in the lake. She had been rescued and taken to the polyclinic.

"She doesn't come from here. She lives in the hostel," Dusya explained. "Mother happened to be at the polyclinic when she was brought in. She heard Maria and the other doctors telling her that she ought to have the baby, that the state would help her and that she ought to apply to the Comsomol, and get the fellow to face his responsibilities and so on. The girl listened to the doctors for a long time as if agreeing with them, but when she went out, Mother saw her go straight back to the lake. Mother stopped her, had a good talk with her and brought her back home. Since then the girl's been sitting there crying. What happens next we don't know. That's the secret Lyuba thinks oughtn't to be told."

When they stopped to say good night near Dusya's house, she asked Andrei in, as if she had quite forgotten how late it was. Andrei declined the invitation. The house lay in darkness except for a glimmer of light from the kitchen where Dusya's mother and her visitor were probably waiting up for her.

"I expect they're both sitting there crying," said Dusya. "I'll calm them down all right."

She shut the garden gate with a clang. Andrei felt certain Dusya would really succeed in consoling the unhappy, frightened girl who had been driven to the lake by her terror and despair.



Full of new impressions and happy about the course the evening had taken, happy too that he was beginning to share the cares and worries of people round him, Andrei opened the door of his room. The light was out. Nikolai must be working late. Or had he gone off again with those new friends of his?

Feeling for the switch, he turned on the light and saw Nikolai, fully dressed, stretched at full length on his bed. His eyes were wide open; he looked at Andrei but said nothing.

"So you're back," Andrei said happily. "Fine. I've had a marvelous evening."

He sat on the edge of Nikolai's bed and told him about Lepikhin and his wife, and about Lyuba and Dusya. After a moment's hesitation, he told him about the girl who had tried to take her life.

Nikolai said nothing and showed no interest in anything Andrei told him. He looked worn out and ill-humoured.

"Why, what's the matter, Nikolai?" Andrei said suddenly. "Here am I burbling on without asking how you're getting on. . . ."

"Me? Oh, the same as usual," Nikolai said grudgingly. "We did our quota of work today. We'd practically no rejects. We'll soon finish the order we're working on. Oh yes, there is some news today," he threw in casually. "Two turners want to leave my section. They've asked for a transfer."

"Any reason given?"

"Ask 'em yourself," Nikolai snapped. "Don't like their foreman, that's what it is. Oh, to hell with them. We'll manage without them. We'll get others who'll be as good."

He sat up, stretched himself and yawned in a way that emphasized his utter contempt for the turners who wanted to leave him. But Andrei knew his friend too well to be taken in.

Chapter Eight

1

Valya came into the room, flung herself on her bed and, sobbing loudly, buried her head in the pillow. From their places round the table her room-mates watched her heaving back with alarm. One of them grabbed a tumbler and ran to the bathroom for some water.

The bathroom was hot and steamy. Under the hissing shower danced a pink and glowing Polina.

"Hello, Zinochka," she yelled. "You're just in time. Give my back a rub, will you?"

"Can't," said Zina, hastily turning on the cold tap at one of the wash-basins. "Valya's feeling bad. . . ."

Valya still had her face buried in the pillow; the girls fussed over her as she sobbed out disjointed phrases. Zina raised Valya's head firmly and offered her the water, putting the tumbler right up to Valya's mouth so that some water spilled on her frock.

"What d'you think you're doing?" cried Valya. "Spilling cold water over me, it might give the Baby a cold."

She sipped a little water, started sobbing again and told the girls that she was expecting her baby in about three weeks' time and that she and Vladimir had just been to the housing department, only to be told that for the time being no apartment was available.

"We'd been counting so much on that new house—so very much, but they say it's going to be for workers with high qualifications. Now we'll just have to go on waiting. How long, though? Where am I to take my baby?"

At that moment the door was flung wide open and in burst Polina, wearing a bathrobe. Her hair was damp, her skin rosy pink from her bath.

When she found out what was wrong, her first reaction was to blame Vladimir. "Couldn't handle a thing like this, the silly oaf." Then she vented her wrath upon the factory trade-union committee, the factory manager, the housing department.

"If I were in your shoes," she cried to Valya, "I'd not have left their offices until I'd got what I wanted. I'd sit there and wait all day and the next if necessary. Have you ever heard of such a way of treating people? What's more, I'd write and complain to our deputy to the Supreme Soviet."

Then, lowering her voice, she sat down and said calmly: "And now, Valya, don't be a little silly. You mustn't think of leaving this place. Move the beds about a bit and make room for a cot. You can put the baby in the crèche during the day and it can sleep here at night."

The idea of keeping the child at their hostel appealed to the girls at once. Valya alone objected. Raising her tearful, swollen face, she asked what would happen if the baby cried a lot and kept the girls from sleeping. They'd be annoyed then.

"But why should it cry?" asked Polina. "It won't if you look after it the way they teach at the consultations."

Looking round, Polina started making suggestions about how things should be rearranged to make room for the baby. Valya, however, said that she wanted to live together with Vladimir and the baby. What kind of family life would she have if they were all separated—the mother here, the father there, and the baby in a crèche?

"I want a room of our own, a separate one where we can be together."

"Who doesn't?" said Polina. "But it's your own fault. Why did you hide from everybody that you were pregnant? You've got to think of the position of the factory manager, too—he can't provide accommodation for everybody all at once."

"I was ashamed," said Valya. "Vladimir wanted me to mention it but I was ashamed...."

"Ashamed?" cried Polina. "You were born yourself, weren't you? Your mother wasn't ashamed of you. If I were married I'd have a baby every year until I became a Heroine Mother. They say you get a lovely medal for that. I've never seen one, though."

One of the girls had seen the medal and explained what it looked like. Valya listened with interest and then, somewhat calmer, showed Polina the green silk quilt that she had bought for the baby.

"I chose green because I don't know whether it's a boy or a girl," she

said. "It's pink for a girl and blue for a boy, you know. Green will go with either."

After talking a little more about the future baby, Polina left. She was in a hurry to get to the hairdresser's ("I can't go to work looking like this"). With her departure, Valya's spirits fell again.

But there was not much time for worrying. Soon Vladimir would be arriving for his dinner, and she had nothing ready. Valya tidied the rumpled bed, took a saucepan out of her locker and went into the kitchen. The other girls picked up their sewing and went into the next room; whenever Vladimir came to see his wife, they always tried to leave them on their own.

Nazarenko came in looking gloomy. His face was pale and drawn. He crossed the room as quietly as he could and sat on the very edge of a chair. There was a rather strict rule about not letting men into the girls' hostel but an exception was made for husbands coming to have their meals with their wives.

Valya spread a check-patterned table-cloth on a corner of the table, laid places for two, a mat for the dish and a glass in a shiny metal holder. Everything was new—recent purchases, bright and attractive. But nothing could give Valya any pleasure that day. She served the soup -- sniff—she cut the bread—sniff.

"D'you think it's any easier for me?" Vladimir said, pushing away his soup plate. "I suppose you think I'm a rotter just because I'm not blubbing. Maybe I feel it a thousand times harder than you do."

"Harder!" Valya sobbed. "I know how hard it is for you! You take that trombone of yours under your arm and go off to toot on it, while I lie awake worrying and crying my heart out. It's bad for Baby too; bad for its nerves...."

"What have I done wrong?" Vladimir sprang to his feet, overturning the chair. "So it's my trombone! Why, music's my only consolation these days."

"It's all right for you. You can console yourself with your music and going to restaurants with Yasha while I sit at home by myself. I'd have found myself a 'consolation' too, but where can I go with my tummy sticking out like this? Who wants me? Who'll look at me? Oh, I can't think why I ever married you."

Valya's head dropped to the table. The soup splashed on to the new table-cloth. A girl looked into the room and departed at once, slamming the door. Vladimir, perplexed, sorry for Valya and, at the same time angry with himself, picked up his cap.

"You'll be sorry you said that," he exclaimed. "Oh yes, you'll be sorry, but it will be too late."

He left the room shutting the door noisily. Valya stopped crying and looked up. He had gone. What did he mean when he said she would be sorry but too late? What was he going to do next?

When the girls crept back into the room, they found Valya sitting at the table in front of a plate of cold soup. She was staring blankly in front of her. She was not crying but her face expressed such utter misery that her friends stood petrified at the doorway.

"Come in," Valya said feebly. "He's gone. Left without even eating his dinner.... Oh dear, what's going to happen to me now?"

Next day Polina arrived at the *Tribuna* office very early. There was nobody in the print-shop; Poperechny sat at Valya's typewriter thumping out his own copy.

"I was thinking—Valya will soon be going off on her maternity leave, so I'm having a bit of practice," he said to Polina. "Have a look through this and see whether I've made many mistakes."

Scoring the mistakes with a red pencil, Polina sat down on the visitors' bench. She asked Poperechny whether Andrei would be long, and when he shook his head, studied her watch as if to emphasize that she had not much time to waste in sitting about waiting.

Polina was dressed up for some important occasion. She was wearing a new dark-blue costume and a severely cut blouse. She did not rise to Poperechny's jokes, and when Andrei turned up at last, she told him that she wished to have a confidential talk with him. She pronounced the word confidential very significantly. Andrei wondered, with some concern, whether Polina was going to announce her intention of leaving them again.

"Please sit down, Polina Georgievna," he said, pulling up a chair. "You may talk in Vanya's presence quite freely."

But Polina did not wish to talk in Vanya's presence. Drawing Andrei away from the typewriter to the window, she told him in a whisper about Valya's unhappy plight.

"She didn't sleep a wink last night. Crying all the time. That's very bad for a young mother-to-be, you know. You must do something about it, Andrei Borisovich."

Pursing her lips, she stood waiting for Andrei to say something. What Andrei had to say was that he felt very sorry for Valya but that there were other young newly-weds in the same situation, as letters received by the paper showed. He had thought of printing a selection of them long ago but was afraid that it would not help because there were so many things wrong in the housing situation.

"The factory is expanding more rapidly than the housing," he said, repeating a phrase he had heard the factory manager use. "There's only one thing to be done—to build more houses. And meanwhile be patient and double up."

"I understand all that perfectly," said Polina. "But motherhood is something sacred. When there are no children people can wait, but those who have children or who are expecting them ought to be first on the list. Of course, I've no right to meddle in the editorial work but I would have printed some of those letters on the problem of newly-weds. I'd be ready to write an article about Valya and Vladimir myself."

"Let's hear what Lyuba Zvonaryeva thinks of the idea. The Comsomol committee has had some complaints about accommodation too."

Recently, Andrei often found reason to visit the Comsomol committee office. And each time Lyuba seemed to have been expecting him—she was always in and she always welcomed him with a smile. This time too she was sitting at her desk clipping something out of the *Tribuna*.

"I want to send a reply to Bashkiria," she said, noticing that Andrei was looking at the cuttings. "I'll send them everything you printed about their order and add the resolution our meeting adopted. I had a talk

with Kovalev yesterday—in his shop all the things we suggested have been introduced.”

Lyuba looked sweet-tempered and happy. She was clearly delighted that the initiative taken by the Comsomol committee had turned out right and that it had won the support of older people. Andrei was only too eager to go on talking about a subject in which Lyuba took so much interest. He looked through everything she had prepared to send to the oil workers, told her that Kovalev and Lepikhin were putting their ideas on the subject down in writing for the *Tribuna*, and promised to publish in each number a report on the progress of work on the order.

Polina listened with mounting impatience, frequently glancing at her watch. It wasn't for this that she had brought the editor to Zvonaryeva. Of course, it was most important that the oil workers should get their equipment early so that they could build their new town more quickly, but was that room for Valya and Vladimir any less important?

“I've got to be in the print-shop in five minutes, Andrei Borisovich,” she said, with another glance at her watch. “Perhaps we'll tell Lyuba what we came to see her about.”

“Oh yes,” said Andrei. “Listen, Lyuba.”

Lyuba frowned but let Polina have her say.

“I don't know what we can do,” she said with a shrug. “The Comsomol committee has no flats to dispose of. It's the shops that do the allocating. True, every time a new house is finished I run after the shop managers and argue that they shouldn't forget the newly-weds, but my list's a very long one. Of course, I could add Valya's name to it but it'll be a long time before her turn comes.”

“Why's that?” cried Polina. “Valya's as good as anybody else, isn't she?”

“She is but she's no better. And then neither she nor Vladimir told anybody that there was a baby coming along so soon. Vladimir ought to work on Kovalev.”

Polina, however, had no confidence in Vladimir; she wanted Lyuba herself to speak to Kovalev. In the end Lyuba wrote “Nazarenko, Valentina—with husband and child” at the bottom of her list.

When Polina had left, Lyuba put the list away and sighed. Really, something ought to be done about this problem.

“What if we ask for one of the apartment houses now being built to be ear-marked for the newly-weds?” Andrei suggested. “It could be known as the House of the Newly-Wed. It'd be the most attractive, the brightest building in the place. I'm sure it'd be built in no time. Every prospective tenant would give a hand after work or on Sundays. Come on, Lyuba, let's start a campaign together for the House of the Newly-Wed—the Comsomol and the *Tribuna* together.”

“You talk about that house as if you'd some personal interest in it. Maybe you have.”

“Not at present. I'm quite disinterested.”

Andrei took out of his brief-case a bunch of letters from young people who had recently married, and sat down beside Lyuba. Lyuba pretended not to notice that he had pulled his chair closer to her. She read the letters with a serious face and put one of them aside as not worth printing: the husband and wife were both slackers; the wife had stopped working and was living with her parents in the old village.

"They've a room as it is, they're living with her people. But the parents want to get rid of them because the son-in-law's a drunkard and a rowdy."

The letters turned out to be rather monotonous in their contents: everybody wrote that they wanted to live a real family life—and that meant separate accommodation. But Lyuba and Andrei added a brief editorial to the letters, mentioning the idea of a house for newly-wed couples and even pointing at a definite four-storey house being built in a very lovely place, on rising ground overlooking the lake.

"If only we had a picture," said Lyuba. "What a pity we can't use one. You know, a pretty house with a loggia and balconies with flower pots. And a garden full of flowers in front."

"I think we've got just the picture that'll do. It's of some rest home or other. Let's go and have a look." They went into Andrei's office. Polina soon found the half-tone they required. There were some discrepancies, to be sure: the building had three, not four floors, and stood not on a rise but in a broad meadow; moreover, there was a sign on the gate that clearly showed it to be a miners' rest home.

"We'll cut out the signboard," Polina assured Andrei. "There's an engraver working in the first machine shop. And underneath we'll use the caption: 'This is what the House of the Newly-Wed ought to look like.'"

She bounced off to the workshop, saying she would use the occasion to get another letter on the subject. Lyuba sighed and went to post her reply to the oil workers.

"I'll drop in this evening to see the letters you're going to use," she said. "Will that be all right?"

"It will, Lyuba. Do come. I'll expect you."

3

For several days Andrei and Nikolai had scarcely met. They returned to their room late at night, Nikolai trying to be the first back and in bed asleep by the time Andrei came in. Or pretending to be asleep. Obviously he did not want to have one of those heart-to-heart talks he used to value so highly.

But this evening he could not avoid a talk. Andrei had come back early and Nikolai could not possibly pretend to be asleep; elbows on pillow, he had to listen to Andrei telling him about the House for the Newly-Wed, about how Lyuba and he had been to have a look at the house that was going up, and how they had climbed to the very top and had a splendid view of the surrounding countryside.

Andrei told all this in a most animated way; he suddenly noticed, however, that Nikolai was looking at him quite vacantly; it was doubtful whether he was even listening.

"What on earth's the matter, Nikolai?" he said. "What's wrong? Tell me."

But Nikolai did not reply. He sat on the edge of the bed, looking pale and ruffled, the edge of a blanket drawn over one bare shoulder, his bare feet swinging between the bed and the floor. His light blue singlet and somewhat darker shorts, his thin neck and prominent collar bone made him look like the young Nik of school or college days in Moscow.

"Things are still going badly in the shop," Nikolai said at length. "The older workers have turned against me. Instead of helping me they're up to all sorts of dodges. And the young workers haven't any experience. Nor have I, for that matter. . . ."

"What did I tell you? It isn't so easy to become a foreman. You need experience! And that takes time."

"But we can't take time over our work we've got to deliver right away," Nikolai said gloomily. "We were behindhand yesterday. The same today. Kovalev's told me once already that things are getting worse in my section. I realize now how hard it is to go into a shop straight from college. I heard from Bychkov today—he's in the same mess as I am."

Bychkov belonged to Nikolai's year at college. On graduation he had taken a job at a machine-building works in the Ukraine where he was appointed assistant duty-engineer in a large workshop. He had written twice to Nikolai—the first letter was full of jubilation about his new work but the second was all complaints about quite insuperable difficulties.

"Bychkov always used to mope and get the wind up," said Andrei. "I remember the way he was before every exam. He's not a good example. Now take Sharov; why is he such a good foreman? He didn't go to college, only to a technical school and he's had no more practical experience than you."

"But they do practical work right away at technical school, not like we did it at college. They get used to work there, don't you see? Sharov didn't have to learn how to work here in the factory; he brought that with him."

The blanket slipped off Nikolai's shoulder. He pulled it up to his chin.

"Getting used to work isn't something that can be inoculated into you," said Andrei. "If a chap's lazy or if he shies away from real work, he can work all his life without getting used to it."

"So I'm lazy, am I? If that's what you think, it's no good talking to you at all. Anyway, we'd better go to sleep."

Pursing his lips as he used to do as a little boy when anybody offended him, Nikolai lay down and drew the blanket over his head. The blanket was short and, as he tugged, it came clear of his feet. Andrei could see the toes wiggling on those feet. Oh no, Nik was not asleep, Nik didn't want to go to sleep. He was simply offended, he was lying there feeling bad, angry maybe. And, true enough, Nik couldn't be called lazy. What was wrong with him was something quite different: he was indecisive, lacked confidence in his own strength, he was instinctively drawn to whoever was the stronger, without understanding what real strength consisted of.

Ragged clouds raced across the sky and the room became quite dark. Andrei yawned and felt drowsy. But Nikolai raised his head from the pillow and sat up again.

"It's easy for you to criticize. You have quite a different kind of work to do. You don't have turners coming up to you and saying: 'Comrade foreman, there's something wrong with my lathe, please help me.' That happens to me several times a day. And I can't send for the repair-men every time, can I? I don't want to get the reputation everywhere of not knowing my job. Though there are times when I don't know it. And then the older workers look at me and mock: there's a babe in arms who's

wangled a job as a foreman but doesn't know a thing about the work. What was the good of my learning the integral calculus and how to draw all kinds of projections if I can't even repair the simplest lathe?"

"If you can't repair it yourself, ask somebody who can do it."

"There you are again: 'ask somebody.' I can't go on endlessly asking and asking. I won't have any authority if I do that. After all, I'm a foreman—the main link in the production process."

Bounding from the bed, Nikolai started pacing up and down the room, complaining about everybody who was undermining his authority—about the older workers who laughed at him behind his back; about Dusya who, the day before, had announced in the hearing of all that she had been told to show him the ropes in the shop, and finally about the institute where nobody had taken the trouble to prepare him properly for his future work.

Propping his head on his hands, Andrei watched Nikolai—the blue blanket flung over Nikolai's shoulder, with one end trailing behind, revealing the bare lanky legs, the schoolboy face, the snub nose, the hair all awry. So this was the "main link" in the production process! If only that "main link" could see itself just now with its dragging tail, its thin sparrow legs, its ruffled hair, its pitiful eyes. . . .

"It isn't so easy to become a 'main link,' Nik. You think it's enough to be appointed foreman. You've got to show by your work that you really are a foreman and only then ask people to treat you with respect. It's no good sticking your nose up, Nik; you ought to be more modest."

"Modest! It's not modesty I lack. It's something quite different—decisiveness. Yes, decisiveness. That's something nobody can work properly without. I don't want to blame Mother, but all my life, since I was a kid, she's been drumming into me that the main human virtue is modesty. But while learning to be modest I acquired some wretched things as well: shyness, indecisiveness, doubts whether I had the right attitude about anything. Why have I always got to consider myself the last of all? Why should I think that everyone is better than me? That modesty you talk about has been the ruin of my private life. . . . Look at this."

Flinging off the blanket, Nikolai bent down and dragged a suitcase from under his bed.

"Read this," he said, handing Andrei a letter written in an even, flowing hand. "It's from Nina."

"Thanks for your letters which I've been such a long time in replying to," Andrei read. "Though really there was no need to answer them because you don't ask me anything. You write quite poetically with your nice descriptions of nature and the stars and flowers, etc. I'm awfully glad you've been made a foreman and that you're settling down at the job. I've taken all my exams. Will get my degree soon and then go somewhere to work. I haven't decided where to go, though. I'd like to choose a place where the scenery is as pretty as it is where you are so that we can exchange letters describing the pines and birch trees. Best wishes to Andrei. Nina."

"You jackass. Run to the post-office and send her a telegram. 'Love you. Waiting for you. Kisses. Nikolai.' Why, she's looking round for somewhere to go. Don't you understand what you ought to be writing? Or have I got to do it for you?"

"Don't you dare." Nikolai sprang forward and snatched the letter out of Andrei's hand. "You've no right to interfere. And stop bossing me. You're always doing it."

"Oh, all right, do things your own silly way. You'll be sorry for it afterwards, when it's too late."

Outside it was raining. The rain drummed on the metal window-sill, splashed noisily into the drain pipes. Then a gust of wind slammed the window noisily to and at once all the sounds outside became muffled and monotonous. The gentle patter of the raindrops brought sleep to Andrei. Nikolai lay feeling hurt and listening to his companion's steady breathing; then he rolled over on his other side and began to think about what he would write to Nina in the morning.

Chapter Nine

1

The editor of *Tribuna* sent an enquiry to the factory manager: "Please inform us what measures have been taken in connection with the letter from a group of designers concerning Engineer A. M. Kovalev's invention." The factory manager's secretary put the letter in the Urgent file, but though Budanov read it he kept putting off his reply.

"What measures have been taken?" Well, there was a time when much had been done: an experimental machine built, tests carried out -- yes, and caps had been flung into the air after them—requests made for the machine to be put into production. Budanov recalled that something like a banquet had been arranged in Kovalev's honour when he received his patent for the invention. And then? Then nothing was done; the request to include the machine in the production plan was turned down on the grounds that an improved type of a similar machine was being prepared. This was followed by the design of the new machine; the designing office set to work on it.

The new machine was called the Kurzhen. It had been designed at the head office. In the opinion of the factory designers it fell far short of Kovalev's "shrew," but obviously the head office knew better than they what kind of machine was needed. There was much talk on the subject at the factory where people were indignant that the "shrew" had not been properly appreciated; but an order is an order and many people worked on the Kurzhen with good will. An experimental one was built, it was taken off somewhere for tests, but since then all talk about either machine had come to an end, tempers had cooled and even Kovalev seemed to have forgotten about his invention.

And now, if you please, the new editor of *Tribuna* drags the whole affair into the newspaper and asks the management for a reply.

Reflectively Budanov scrawled across the bottom of the letter: "Fully agree with the opinion of the writers of this letter. Would be glad to put the Kovalev machine into production. Have frequently approached my superiors on the subject. Am today sending memo to head office requesting the factory be permitted to include the machine in its production plan. Budanov, factory manager."

Without delay he wrote to the head office, saying that as the Kurzhen had not come back from its tests and the factory had no information about its work, he was repeating his request to include the Kovalev machine in the factory's production programme, especially as it had passed several tests.

When Budanov had signed the letter he walked to the shops, dropping in on Stoletov on the way.

"I've written to head office and enclosed cuttings from the *Tribuna*," he said. "We'll see what happens."

"I've heard nothing myself," said Stoletov. "I tried writing to a man I know there but nothing came of it."

He took a copy of his letter from his files and showed it to Budanov.

"Yes, you've got all the facts there," said Budanov after reading the letter. "But you wrote to the wrong address, it seems to me. So far as I know, Zhukov is directly interested in the Kurzhen. Try and think of somebody else you could write to."

Stoletov, however, found it hard to believe that a leading expert—an engineer, moreover—could hold up the construction of an excellent and much-needed machine for personal reasons.

"I'll write once again," he said.

Thinking that perhaps Zhukov had not received the first letter, Stoletov rewrote the whole detailed story of the Kovalev invention, adding that this was his second letter on the subject and that he hoped for a reply this time.

"I am firmly convinced that the mechanism that Comrade Kovalev has invented is something that the national economy requires," he wrote in conclusion. "I shall raise the question everywhere: at the Ministry, with the Council of Ministers, with the Central Committee. I am counting on your help in this campaign. I am not going to drop it on any account."

That last phrase pleased him tremendously: let the fellow realize that the policy of keeping silent was no use now. He'd reply all right.

Stoletov sent the letter registered, put the counterfoil away in his wallet and went to Kovalev's shop. Before calling on the shop manager, he spoke to Syurtukov who was, as usual, complaining about the foundry and the forge. Then he stopped for a few minutes to watch Yasha Milovidov at work on his lathe.

Smart work, he thought, eyeing the parts piling up beside the lathe. He wondered whether there were many rejects.

He thought of asking the foreman but did not find Nikolai in his usual place: Yelena Protasova was sitting there, writing something down with an air of concentration.

"Good morning. Where's your foreman?" asked Stoletov.

"He's gone to see the shop manager. They're allocating flats in the new house today. He's gone to try and help his pals."

At that moment Yasha walked by with an unlighted cigarette dangling from his lips. Yasha's self-confident face was drawn and haggard; a long dark scratch stretched right across one cheek.

"See that?" Yelena nodded after Yasha. "Nice bit of decoration."

"How's his work?"

"All right," Yelena said vaguely. "Why shouldn't it be?"

When Stoletov reached the shop manager's office, he found there Kovalev, Nikolai Zhukov, the shop trade-union organizer and two turners

from Nikolai's section—Vladimir Nazarenko and an older man. All of them looked flushed and excited; Vladimir was red to the tips of his ears and his face wore an obstinate look. He was standing next to Nikolai and it was clear they were on each other's side.

"You can appeal to the factory trade-union committee if you like," Kovalev was saying when Stoletov came in. "But I'm not going to change the order on my list."

"I shall appeal to the trade-union committee and to the Comsomol committee," snapped Nikolai. "I consider your attitude to the young workers quite unfair."

He swung on his heel and went out, slamming the door. Kovalev winced as if he had toothache and handed a slip to the older worker.

"Take this to the housing department," he said. "You can move in without any worries. Nazarenko will have to wait until the next house is built."

The workers went out, followed by the shop trade-union organizer. Stoletov asked what the argument had been about. About flats, he was told: several flats in a new house had been allotted to the shop; these flats had been promised to the older workers; Nikolai, however, had insisted that one of them be given to Nazarenko on the grounds that his wife was expecting a baby.

"If I'd been told about it earlier, we could, perhaps, have squeezed another flat out of the factory manager. But Nazarenko didn't say a word about it. How on earth was I to know that the young fellow was about to become the father of a family?"

And, indeed, it was difficult to imagine Vladimir Nazarenko in that role. Stoletov smiled at the very idea. But Kovalev went on fuming, saying that as a result of that row, an experienced turner would quit the shop or, at least, Zhukov's section of it.

"Zhukov doesn't know how to get on with the older workers," Kovalev complained. "We've few enough of them as it is; they need careful handling, they're valuable."

"They shouldn't be so quick to take offence, though."

"Oh, those old fellows have their sense of pride. They know their worth. When young Zhukov first came to us, they were polite enough to him. True, they had their bit of fun but that was to be expected. But Zhukov didn't realize they were joking. So relations grew strained. . . . Maybe the lad wants to be independent and manage everything on his own. I had a letter from his father not long ago. He's a well-known engineer in Moscow. I know him slightly. He wrote to tell me he'd given his son a letter asking me to give him a helping hand to begin with. What had I done about it, he asked me. But I never saw that letter—the boy never gave it to me."

"Did you ask him why he didn't?"

"I did. He said he didn't want to use any influence. . . ."

"Good for him. By the way, I wrote again today about your 'shrew.' Asked for an immediate reply. If I don't get one, I'll take the matter up elsewhere."

Without saying a word, Kovalev placed some castings on his desk. Then he put a few folders into a drawer and looked at Stoletov glumly.

"There was no sense in doing that, Stepan Demyanovich," he said at last. "I've already told you, as far as I'm concerned the whole affair's



over. I don't want to resurrect it. In any case I don't believe in the resurrection of the dead."

Stoletov went out feeling somewhat annoyed with Kovalev. As he crossed the yard he noticed Andrei and Lyuba sitting together in his office. They were talking and laughing about something and did not notice him pass the open window.

"In the evening when work's over," he heard Andrei say, "I wish you would, Lyuba. . . ."

Lyuba's reply was inaudible.

Why on earth had they chosen his office for their talk, Stoletov wondered. They might have found some other place. . . .

He went into his office; he brushed aside the copy of the newspaper that Andrei handed him.

"I've seen it. I don't agree with your idea. What we need to do is to see there are decent homes for

all and not build special houses for newly-weds, for old folk, for engaged couples and so on."

Lyuba and Andrei looked at Stoletov in surprise: they could not understand why he was so angry. They had been quite certain that he would support them. They had been waiting for him, hoping that he would commend the paper and the Comsomol for their interesting initiative and help them as he had done over everything hitherto.

"You've taken on too much: the oil workers' order and now this house. You're not seeing things through. You'll come a cropper when it turns out that you've not fulfilled your promises."

"We'll fulfil them," said Lyuba. "You ask the factory manager how we're getting on."

She turned to Budanov who had just come in and smilingly asked for his support. Not knowing what was going on, Budanov said nothing, but returned Lyuba's smile: Lyuba was a pretty girl. And the editor, he was an up-and-coming young fellow: you wouldn't find one like him at other factories.

Lyuba did not pursue the matter of the oil workers' letter any farther and asked Budanov whether he had read the proposal printed in the newspaper about building an apartment house specially for the newly-wed. Budanov said yes, he had, and wanted to know how many marriages the Comsomol committee had planned for the coming year, so that he could plan the construction of the aforementioned house accordingly.

"Of course we've got no plan," said Lyuba. "How can such events take place according to plan?"

"Aha, so they can't! You admit that?" Budanov crowed. "Then what guarantee can you give me that the house will be sufficient for your newly-

weds—even for the first year's batch? You'll have a new waiting list in a couple of months. So what do we do then? Build another house?"

The colour rushed to Lyuba's cheeks.

"The task of the Comsomol is to protect the interests of young people trying to found families. We must help those who have fallen in love and who've decided to live together and have children and live a family life..."

Lost for further argument, Lyuba stopped and transfixed Budanov with an angry eye. Budanov smiled, and Lyuba suddenly realized that her cheeks must be bright red and her hair in a mess and her face altogether much too excited-looking for the leader of a youth organization. Her hand darted to her hair, she applied a handkerchief to her cheeks, but the look she cast Budanov remained bold and full of fight.

"You ought to take our difficulties into account, comrades, if only a little bit," Budanov said, addressing all three of them. "During the last few years we've built a whole town starting from zero. A town. Not to mention the factory itself. And we've not stopped building; we've got everybody's interests in mind. But we just can't do it all at once. You really ought to go a bit easier with your marriages."

Budanov glanced at Andrei and Lyuba and said, as if at a tangent: "People are so confident about the future that they're getting married while they still have to live in hostels. And quite right, too... But as to that house of yours—well, that's not such a simple matter," he hastened to add, catching Lyuba's hopeful look. "That requires thinking over. I must get some advice and consider the pros and cons. What's your opinion, Stepan Demyanovich?"

Stoletov understood; Budanov needed his support.

"My opinion is this: you'd be right to think how we can help our newly-weds. We're rather too fond of repeating that we've built a town from scratch. All right, so we have. But we're still badly short of housing. That's why all sorts of amateurish ideas like this House for the Newly-Wed crop up. I curse our Communists for turning in bad work at our study courses and for not doing their home-work, and one of them came to me the other day and said: 'Look here, I've got two children, a wife and a mother-in-law—five of us—all living in one room. I have to go into the woods to do my home-work in peace.' And he's right, too. And we go on boasting that we're building houses with modern plumbing, bathrooms and so forth. What's the good of crowing about bathrooms when people live five in a room. We're not building enough, that's the trouble. We're not fulfilling our programme. And we're not particularly bothered by the fact, either."

"Who isn't particularly bothered?"

"You and me in the first place. We're the main culprits..."

Andrei and Lyuba slipped out of the office; Stoletov picked up the paper and glanced at the article about the House for the Newly-Wed.

"Well, well, it's all there. Picture, too—flowers, balconies, archways and all. They haven't worked the idea out properly but it's a good thing they've taken it up, it'll make us think about the next step. After all, there are ways of building much more quickly. Conveyor methods can be introduced, houses can be assembled out of prefab panels—you can put a whole wall up at once without bothering with any bricks. We'll have

to insist that the regional organizations send us the machinery. Surely they'll let us have it if we raise the matter with them seriously."

"All the machinery's being used on new buildings in the town," said Budanov. "D'you think I haven't asked for it?"

"Well, you must have asked the wrong way. You asked by yourself." Just you. We've got to overwhelm them by numbers. And not ask—insist. Come on, let's have Koryakov in."

The building conference was under way. Budanov sent for Koryakov. Koryakov brought with him the civil engineer, and the civil engineer brought the supervisor. Stoletov's table was soon covered with plans, drawings, designs of future houses, working schedules, order forms for building materials.

"A splendid idea, this house for people who've just got married," said the young supervisor, looking through the newspaper. "If they're not stingy with funds, we could make the place really poetical."

Koryakov was of the opinion that one house wouldn't suffice—they'd be asking for a whole street, a whole neighbourhood for the newly-wed. The Comsomol had no consideration for others—the young people ought to go slow on getting married until there were enough houses.

When Budanov heard his own words on Koryakov's lips, they sounded silly.

"Nonsense," he objected sharply, "they're quite right to get a move on and marry. At your speed of getting things done, the working class would have to slow down all of its cultural requirements, too. And those requirements, by the way, are growing, and that without asking your permission."

Listening to Budanov, Stoletov recalled a talk he had had recently with Ivan Konstantinovich. "Why's he working as a simple pattern-maker?" Ivan Konstantinovich had asked about Lepikhin as he was preparing to go to his pupil's lesson. "He's a man of intelligence. You'll excuse my saying so, but he's much easier to teach than you were. You sometimes got stuck over the most elementary things, whereas Lepikhin has an all-round knowledge of things. That's true not only of him, incidentally. I'm working now with a group of lads who've just left school and who are preparing to take extra-mural courses. I tell you frankly, their cultural standards are considerably higher than the jobs they're doing require. Yet they're quite content to go on in their present positions. Lepikhin said to me not long ago: 'the highest position in the world is that of being a Soviet working man.'" Yes, thought Stoletov, it was a fine thing to be a Soviet working man, and it was a sad business when someone failed to realize, as did Koryakov, that the cultural requirements of the working people were rising every day.

"With all respect to you, comrade builders, let me remind you once and for all that you're going to have constantly growing demands made on you," Stoletov said. "At the present time we are building flats for highly-qualified workers; they have to have studies in them so that people can work at home if necessary, nurseries for the children, plenty of book-shelf space. But the ordinary run of worker is beginning to collect books too and to need somewhere to study. Young people are coming to work at the factory with secondary education; they're what you might call members of the Soviet intelligentsia."

"That intelligentsia of yours has scribbled dirty words over all the walls in the hostel in the old village," said Koryakov, scathingly. "They're up again as soon as we've whitewashed them out. Intelligentsia, pshaw!"

"Well, give the walls another coat of whitewash," said Budanov. "Or better still, use oil paint. Not that drab grey you're so fond of, but something bright—yellow or blue. Nice to look at. Something it would be a pity to spoil."

The working day was drawing to a close. Stoletov picked up the receiver.

"Wouldn't you like to come for me, Varya? I'm ready to leave. It's a lovely evening."

Though not fully apparent on the surface, a complete change had come over Stoletov's life with the arrival of his wife and children. He came to work as usual every morning, drove off to meetings and conferences at the regional committee of the Party, was still occupied with a host of different things. But his inner life was quite different now; wherever he was and whatever he did he knew that when he went home his sons would scamper to tell him everything that had happened to them during the day; Varya, looking at his face, could tell immediately whether he had had a good day; Ivan Konstantinovich, tactfully choosing the right moment, would share with him his impressions of what he had read in the newspapers.

Without these commonplace happenings Stoletov would have felt himself starved of those joys that every man deserves.

But he knew that with the coming of autumn and a new term at the music school Varya would leave Verkhnyaya Kamenka. She could not settle down to being a housewife. Surely, though, he could find her some suitable work. If only he could tempt her to take up running the music circle. When she arrived that evening he would show her the club, with its piano and its music room. He would let her hear the factory choir.

He made the suggestion when Varya turned up.

"Yes, let's do that," said Varya. "But not for long. We'll have a stroll afterwards."

They set out for the club. As they passed the factory gates they met Budanov who had driven up in a dusty, dark-blue Pobeda.

"Stepan Demyanovich! Just the man I want," he said. "I've just taken a turn with Koryakov round all the building sites. Please excuse me, Varvara Ivanovna, but I need him for half-an-hour."

He suggested that Varya drop in on his wife who was sitting at home by herself. He still had some work to do.

"Get in, do," he said, almost forcing Varya into the back of the car. He told the driver to take her to his flat.

Without knowing quite why, Varya obeyed this bird-headed lamp-post of a man. She had not the slightest wish to go and see Budanov's wife; she would gladly have gone home. But the children would probably be out at play, and Ivan Konstantinovich who had a lesson that evening would have left, leaning on the walking-stick his grandsons had carved for him, and carrying his battered old brief-case. She would be on her own.

Varya found Anna Budanova in the courtyard. She must have seen the car coming and thought it was bringing her husband home. When

she recognized Varya she stopped abruptly; her face clouded with disappointment; a second later, however, she held out a polite hand.

"Come in, come in, Varvara Ivanovna," she said. "Come and have a cup of tea. I've just taken a sponge-cake out of the oven."

The two women sat at the table and drank tea. Varya ate a piece of cake in silence. It tasted too sweet. Anna Budanova was on tenterhooks: wasn't that the front-door bell, wasn't that her husband's booming voice outside? But all that came was a telephone message: "Delayed for an hour or two at the factory. Don't worry."

"It's not that I worry," she complained to Varya. "I'm simply bored. You probably don't know it, but we lost our son here. Our younger son. The elder one was killed in the war."

She dabbed at her eyes, wiping away the tears that flowed so often and so copiously. Speaking almost in a whisper, she told Varya how the younger boy had caught a chill the winter they came to Verkhnyaya Kamenka while helping to unload the equipment. He was only fourteen but he just would not be outdone by his elders—his father and the workers. She had not kept him back, she had not looked after him; in her grief for her elder son she had neglected the younger.

"Every morning when my husband goes to the factory I go to the cemetery. I sit there and cry and tidy the grave. I know that the flowers and the monument are no use to him but I do my best. I deceive myself by pretending it's all for him."

The dusk crept into the room but Anna did not put on the light and continued to talk about her misfortune. Varya listened without making any attempt to console her—such grief is inconsolable.

"Why don't you take up some work, Anna Ivanovna?" Varya asked. "You would find things easier if you were among people."

"But what about my husband? Who would take care of him? Don't think he's strong and healthy, oh no. He's got a stomach ulcer, he can't take ordinary food; everything has to be minced. Only light foods, too. He's had half his stomach removed. Really, I don't know how he manages to keep going. So I couldn't go to work, you see. I might lose him."

If Stepan were in poor health could she, Varya, drop her work and devote all her thoughts, all her life to him? Would Stepan accept such a sacrifice from her? Yes, he probably would, for didn't he want her to stay here with him as it was?

"Sitting in the dark?" Budanov's merry voice reached them. "What are you two dreaming about? Didn't even hear me come in."

He switched on the light and scanned his wife's face. Her eyes were red again, she'd been crying, letting her thoughts dwell on the past. It had to stop; it wasn't right for anyone to live on memories alone.

"Where's Stepan?" asked Varya.

"Gone home. He thought you'd have left by now."

Varya rose. The Budanovs did not attempt to keep her—Anna was already warming something up on the hot plate watched by her husband's tender, concerned, but vexed eyes.

"I'm not hungry, Anna," he told her. "I had something to eat at the dietetic restaurant. Honestly I did, dear, I had some fritters, chicken broth and strawberries. Now, *you* couldn't offer me strawberries, could you?"

Varya wished them good night and went out. The car was at the door; she got in next to the driver.

"Home?"

"Yes, please," she said as she slammed the door.

Swinging the car round, the driver took it along the smooth asphalt, cutting across the square near the factory and passing the Stalingrad. Then the asphalt ended, the houses stood back from the road with trees in front of them. Varya could see the lit-up verandah of their flat long before they reached the house. She saw the white curtains, the porch, the wicket-gate where Stepan was standing, waving to her.

"So the lady of the house deserted us, eh?" he said as he walked to the car. "We managed all right, though. Fed the children, made them wash and put them to bed. We haven't had supper yet. We were waiting for you."

He helped his wife out of the car, took her by the arm and led her into the house where Ivan Konstantinovich stood in the door, wearing his best white jacket.

2

Smartly dressed and smelling strongly of eau-de-Cologne, Yasha had already managed to put away a drink or two and was in gay, expansive mood. Nikolai bumped into him at the door of the Stalingrad. Yasha at once insisted on accompanying him to the lake.

"There's a girl lives there who's celebrating her birthday or something. There'll be home-brewed ale and a gramophone. Let's go and have a good time, Nikolai Nikolayevich."

"But I don't know the girl. It'll be awkward," said Nikolai. "And I've got my working clothes on."

Yasha brushed aside Nikolai's objections. It doesn't take long to get acquainted. Nikolai would have to change, though: the girls over there liked to dress up and were very fussy about clothes.

He practically pushed Nikolai back through the door and ran up the stairs three at a time. Nikolai trailed after him, wondering what would happen when Yasha and Andrei met. Andrei would put on that official tone of his to emphasize his dislike of Yasha, and that would be very unpleasant.

But things worked out differently. Andrei greeted Yasha most politely, asked where they were off to, and proposed that he should go too.

"Take me along, unless you're afraid I shall pinch all your girls from you. I mean to dance non-stop the whole evening."

Yasha felt flattered: fancy a fellow like Andrei Korolev joining his company of his own accord. He assured Andrei at once that he could have a free run of the girls and that he would play his accord for Andrei to dance to. Carefully looking over the way his companions were dressed, he advised Andrei to change his grey tie for a blue striped one.

"Wear your hats. Not many of our boys have got hats. I'm thinking of getting one myself, but I don't know whether it'd suit me."

Andrei offered him his hat to try on; Yasha spent a long time looking at himself in the mirror. The hat suited him; he tilted it slightly, turned down the brim and at once looked like a film villain.

"Makes me look like an actor," he said with satisfaction. "As soon

as I get my next wage packet I'll go to town and buy myself a hat. Not a blue one, though. Green's more fashionable."

They had to walk to their destination, a lake-side factory where coloured local stone was made into ornaments. All the boats had been taken out by fishermen. They could see them dotting the lake, quite motionless, some among the reeds close to the bank, others far out in the middle. From every boat projected several rods and the silhouettes of the fishermen stood clearly against the light background of the surface of the lake.

"Looks fine, doesn't it?" said Andrei.

Yasha glanced at his watch and urged him on—it was getting on for nine, they would be late, the girls would have drunk everything up, it wouldn't be any fun.

"I've brought this as a stand-by," he said, showing them the neck of a half-litre bottle of vodka that he had in his pocket. "So we'll not be left high and dry."

Nikolai stole a worried glance at Andrei. Obviously, that bottle in Yasha's pocket wasn't going to please him. But Andrei went on smiling as brightly as ever and talked to Yasha in the friendliest of tones.

It was an easy walk. The narrow path followed the shore of the lake. In places it ran along the water's edge, in others it climbed up abrupt cliffs. Honeysuckle bushes in full flower clung to the steep slopes and in the grassy patches between the hillocks grew whole clumps of tall campanulas with large bell-like flowers. Whistling as he plucked the flowers, Andrei soon had a large handsome bouquet.

"How's that?" he said, binding the stalks with a pliant willow-twigg. "Take it, Nik, I'll pick another bunch."

Yasha watched Andrei's every move with curiosity. What made this smart fellow from Moscow want to pick flowers? Why was he clambering up the slope after the brightest and biggest flowers, not caring a damn for his white shoes?

Yasha saw the point of the flowers only later when Andrei presented them with his compliments to the girl who was giving the party. The girl, blushing at the unexpectedness of the gift, did not know what to do with the flowers and stood in the middle of the room clutching them to her chest. But here Yasha displayed his imagination and his gallantry; picking up a bucket, he ran off to the well and put both bouquets into water.

There were practically only girls at the long table covered with odd table-cloths. They were all nicely dressed in silk frocks with their hair done prettily. A few boys sat in a bunch at one end of the table. They had obviously put away a good deal of the ale, for their faces were flushed and their greeting to the new-comers was not exactly polite.

"Oh, it's you, Milovidov. On the prowl after our girls again, eh?" one of them shouted. For some reason he had kept his cap on. "Forgotten the way you were thrown out last time?"

"He's not forgotten," said another. "This time he's brought reinforcements. Well, you'll not scare us, there are plenty of us."

"We didn't come to scare you," said Andrei, showing his white teeth in a smile. "And we didn't come to insult your girls, we came to have a dance and enjoy ourselves."

Andrei, apparently, had decided to conquer all the girls present that evening. He sat down at once beside his hostess and called on everybody

to drink to her health, happiness and beauty. She was, actually, a very pretty grey-eyed girl with long braided tresses piled on the top of her head into a crown.

Supper was soon over—the famous home-brewed ale turned out to be somewhat disappointing, and only Yasha went on swilling it down and praising it to the skies. The girls put on a record and the first pair started shuffling near the table. There was little room for dancing. Andrei suggested pushing the table up against the wall.

"We haven't finished yet," said the boy in the cap fiercely. "Are you trying to make yourself a nuisance?"

"It won't bother you in the slightest. You'll be more comfortable, as a matter of fact. You'll be able to sit in the corner and nobody will get in your way."

The girls danced with each other, and so did the boys. Andrei was the only exception. He invited his hostess to dance first, then he danced with every other girl in turn. Nikolai was no dancer; he took up a place near the gramophone and changed the records, choosing the ones that were least scratched and worn.

"Nikolai," shouted Yasha across the room. "What are you sitting there for like an old crock. Come and join us."

Yasha was well under the weather by now. There was a mean look in his eyes, his voice had acquired a truculent ring, he waved his hands freely. He was beginning to feel that his self-esteem had been wounded by someone, that he was being pushed into the background. Who by? By that editor, of course, who was having such a success with the girls.

Swaying slightly, he got up and abruptly stopped the gramophone.

"We'll dance a foxtrot," he announced and chose another record. "The polka's only fit for the nursery..."

The old record began wheezily. Yasha grasped his hostess' hand and set off with slinky, cat-like steps. The boy with a cap on drew another girl to him and took the floor, too, trying to follow Yasha's steps as closely as he could.

The room was stuffy and Andrei flung open the windows. Outside, on a bench below the window, sat three girls who had not been asked to the party. They were not dressed up like the other girls but they were in a happy mood as they sat there with their arms over each others' shoulders, singing something quietly.

"May I join you, girls?" asked Andrei, leaning out of the window.

"Yes, do, if you're not afraid of mosquitoes," one of the girls replied. She wore a kerchief round her head pulled down to her brows. "The mosquitoes in this place are something awful. They're enormous fierce things. Red as camels."

"I don't suppose they'll gobble me all up." Andrei vaulted out of the window. "And if they do, well, there's nobody to waste any tears over me."

He sat down on the bench and looked at the girls with interest. They were very young, more like school girls. They told him they were born and bred in the factory settlement, and that their parents worked as stone polishers and cutters. They'd been to the local school and were now employed at the factory. They didn't like it there, though—it was monotonous, day in, day out, they polished the same sort of stones to be cut up for mounting in cuff links and brooches.

"It's interesting when you get a really pretty piece of stone," one of them told Andrei. "The trouble is they don't often give us the pretty pieces. They send those to the town. There's a big factory there, with real craftsmen. We've got some, too, but they're old. Young craftsmen don't get a chance at our place."

"I had a lovely stone not long ago," said another girl dreamily. With her hair cut short, she looked like a boy. "I began to polish it and a pattern like a twig came, with little leaves and a kind of flower with petals. I showed it to the old man and he took it away from me—it wasn't for my hands to work up, he said. Where that stone's got to now I don't know. It would have made a lovely brooch."

The wind was soft and sultry. A bright light fell on the girls from the window above. The gramophone indoors went on playing one and the same tune. From under the eaves of a near-by house came the sleepy squeak of nesting swallows. A breath of coolness came from the lake across whose smooth waters stretched a bright moonlit path.

The girls grew silent and listened to the music from indoors where the low voice of some singer told of yellowing leaves that floated silently from a birch tree, of old waltzes and autumn dreams. . . .

Dancing feet thudded on the floor, drowning out the singer.

"Nik," Andrei called, leaning into the room. "What about leaving?"

Nikolai did not even look round. He was sitting with Yasha watching the girls dance, one hand resting on the table, holding an unfinished glass of ale. Yasha was bending towards him, saying something and laughing. That laugh, the expression on Yasha's face and the cloudy ale in the glass were all repulsive to Andrei. Why should Nikolai be listening to Yasha so eagerly? What was that good-for-nothing telling him? Some tripe, of course.

Andrei leaped over the low window-sill into the room.

"Don't you like it here?" said the girl who was giving the party. She looked upset. "It's not our fault if. . . ."

"Oh, everything's fine," Andrei said. "I felt a bit hot, that's all. I wanted some fresh air. Come on, Nik, it's time we got a move on," he said, going up to the table. "It's late, you'll oversleep in the morning."

Nikolai rose uncertainly. Yasha flung his arm over his shoulder and forced him down again.

"It's not our way to be first to leave, Comrade Editor. And don't worry, we shan't oversleep. We're not going to bed at all, we'll carry on till the morning and go straight to work."

"You can carry on till the end of the week for all I care," said Andrei, looking Yasha straight in the eyes. "But that's not our way. Up with you, Nik."

He put his arm through Nikolai's and they walked together up to their hostess. They thanked her for her hospitality and wished the rest of the girls good night. It was dark outside, the bench under the window was empty; the lights had gone out in the neighbouring houses.

Nikolai and Andrei strode along the path. Suddenly a piercing whistle sounded behind them. It was Yasha. Two fingers thrust into his mouth, he stood in the brightly lit rectangle of the open door. The whistle sounded like a threat, but Andrei only laughed and whistled back still louder.

"We win, Nik," he said with satisfaction. "I haven't forgotten how to whistle, you see."

"You certainly haven't. You haven't forgotten anything--how to whistle or dance or flirt."

"And I'm not going to forget," said Andrei, humming a tune.

Nikolai listened for a moment and then unconsciously joined in. The cool breeze fanned his face and cleared his head. From the glades came the cool, fragrant scent of grass; a distant echo repeated the song and bore it beyond the mountains.

Chapter Ten

1

In a few days' time Nikolai's section would be working on the oil workers' order. The technical details of the order had reached Nikolai's desk. The shop's technologist, an engineer not much older than Nikolai himself, noticed him studying the blue prints and said:

"Take a good look at them. Maybe you'll think of some better way of handling the job. Those fellows sit in their offices making plans but you on the job can get a clearer picture of the best way of using the tools and machinery."

Nikolai felt excited, inspired. A new order. Till now his work had not required very much thought on his part. His section went on getting work for which Yuri Sharov had originally been responsible; it was simply a matter of carrying on. Now everything was quite different; now it was up to him to solve technical problems; on his ability depended the fulfilment of an important order.

After a little hesitation he went to see Yuri Sharov. Yuri was still very much involved in fitting up his future workshop and he ran his eye over the blue prints somewhat carelessly, adding that the job looked pretty straightforward. He congratulated Nikolai on having got the order:

"It's always terribly interesting when a new job comes along. All kinds of unexpected things crop up; you discover new ways of doing things."

"D'you think the technologists' work is to be relied on?" asked Nikolai.

"That'll all come clear when you're actually working on the order. My advice is not to rely too much on anybody. . . ."

Yuri was called away; he hurried off, promising to drop in on Nikolai during the evening. Nikolai went back to his section. He was unable to apply himself properly to the order that day; all kinds of small, pressing questions distracted him. So after work he went to a quiet corner and sat there for a long time, working out in his mind how to distribute the work. He expected Yuri to come; but it was not Yuri but Dusya who appeared.

"Ah, there you are. I've been looking everywhere for you. . . ."

Nikolai was glad to see Dusya though he knew she could not help him at all.

"Why don't you ask your shop manager?" she asked when Nikolai had told her of his qualms. "He'll help you. He always helps young engineers."

Nikolai, however, did not want to ask Kovalev for help.

"Oh, I'll work it out for myself somehow," he said casually. "I don't want to bother him with a little thing like this."

"Little thing! But this is an important order," Dusya said reproachfully.

She reminded him about the oil workers' letter, and that the Comsomol had pledged itself to see the order was delivered early; now that pledge had to be fulfilled.

"Both the foundry and the forge have finished their work a week ahead of programme. The other welders and I have promised to save ten days. Now everything depends on the machining. The Comsomol committee has asked me to organize a discussion on the new order in your section. Could we hold it after work tomorrow?"

"Yes," said Nikolai. "I don't know whether I'll have everything ready in time, though."

"Go and talk to Kovalev, I tell you. He hasn't gone yet. I saw him sitting in his office. And do be ready with your plan of work tomorrow. After the meeting we'll go for a row on the lake. Vasya's getting a boat from the old man tonight. He'll row it over to our side."

Nikolai, however, did not go to Kovalev. He went on poring over the blue prints till late at night but was able to add nothing of his own, and on the next day he awaited the opening of the discussion with trepidation.

The day went badly from the beginning. Yasha turned up to work nearly an hour late. This he explained by saying he had been to the polyclinic; he had a slip to prove it. But he did not produce the slip, and Nikolai knew very well that Yasha had not been to the polyclinic but had simply overslept and then had a drink or two; his breath gave him away.

The right thing to do would have been to refuse to let Yasha work that day, but this Nikolai did not do. As a result, Yasha spoiled a casting and an unpleasant conversation with the foreman of the technical control department ensued. Yelena Protasova and two older turners looked at Nikolai disapprovingly. It left him in no doubt that in their opinion he ought to give Yasha a severe reprimand.

They must think he had been drinking with Yasha, thought Nikolai. Well, let them. Of course, Yasha was to blame, but a reprimand was not by any means the best way of educating people.

Nikolai felt certain that Yasha's conscience would give him a twinge and that he would do his very best to make up for his conduct. And, actually, Yasha worked well throughout the afternoon and did better than many others.

"Yasha Milovidov never lets a pal down," he whispered to Nikolai. "You help me, I help you, that's what real friendship means...."

The whole day shift stayed for the discussion on the new order. There were also Stoletov, Kovalev, Dusya Syurtukova—from the Comsomol committee—and Vanya Poperechny—for the *Tribuna*. Their presence surprised and worried Nikolai. Why had they all turned up? Were they afraid the young foreman would not be able to handle the new order? Or was his section getting the most important work to do?

Nikolai felt so confused and alarmed that he had not thought out his speech properly when Dusya gave him the floor. He stood up and with eyes averted, mumbled a few phrases about the importance of the order: everyone must realize his responsibilities, they must exert every effort,

they must not be daunted by difficulties. Then, sensing that this was not the sort of talk the workers expected of him, he added that the work would be complicated, not like the job they were on at present, and that it would call for the creative initiative of every turner.

"Give people a chance of getting to know the blue prints first, then you can talk about showing initiative," one of the older workers called out. "You've had these blue prints for two days. Why don't you show them to us?"

Yelena Protasova came up to the table, opened a notebook and waited until the room was quiet.

"There's so much wrong in the section that we've got to think hard about that new order," she said. "Best of all would be if we could be shown the blue prints of the jobs that are coming to us. Those blue prints exist and the foreman shouldn't keep them from us."

She cast a reproachful look at Nikolai and he flushed: now Protasova and the other older workers were going to start nagging him and piling on the blame.

"The blue prints were held up in the chief technologist's department," he broke in. "They're preparing for the new order, too."

"Their preparations are one thing and ours are quite another," retorted Protasova. "They do their work and then all kinds of hitches crop up. It'll be too late to come along with corrections when the job's already reached the lathes. You can't shift the blame off yourself that way, Comrade Zhukov. . . ."

Stoletov listened to Yelena Protasova with pleasure. She spoke calmly, and the suggestions she made were sensible. She glanced from time to time into her little notebook where, no doubt, all her ideas had gradually accumulated.

"What we need most of all is to create an efficient, friendly atmosphere in the section. As it is, there's too much gossip going around. . . . Who's responsible for it I don't rightly know. But I have my suspicions," she added, with a nod towards Yasha. "Our new foreman hasn't got to know people sufficiently well; he trusts the wrong people. It's up to us to help him know his people better."

She stepped aside and resumed her seat. Nikolai felt his cheeks beginning to glow again. He looked at the faces of his turners with an uneasiness that he sought to conceal under a studied indifference. They all looked as usual—nobody laughed, nobody looked at him sarcastically. Yasha leaned back on the bench with an exaggeratedly casual expression on his face.

The young turners who followed Protasova spoke briefly about their requirements: one asked to be transferred to another lathe because his present one couldn't run faster, another complained of delays in the sharpening of the tools, a third suggested that all tools should be prepared in advance so that the turners should not waste time running for them during working hours.

"Uncle Vasya helps me a lot," said a shy young girl in a white beret. "He works next to me so I try to learn from him. It'd be a good thing if Uncle Vasya or some other of the older comrades would help us younger ones. Like instructors."

"We have a foreman for that," called Uncle Vasya. "It's he who ought to be helping everyone. . . . Don't count on me any more. I'm going to the new shop."

He was the turner who had been given a flat in the new house. And, though he had got the flat and had the key in his pocket, he was still smarting from his foreman's remarks. He had handed in his notice to Kovalev, asking for a transfer to the new shop, and, although it had not yet been accepted, he did not expect to be in the section for more than a few days.

"What if we ask you to change your mind and stay," said Kovalev. "I'm asking you, so is Nikolai Nikolayevich."

"It's absolutely no good you asking that," said the turner, "it's a waste of time to raise the matter, Arseni Mikhailovich."

He spoke in a tone that convinced Nikolai that however far Kovalev cared to go in humbling himself before the man, he, Nikolai, would not lift a finger to keep him in his section.

No longer listening to what people were saying, Nikolai sat thinking how he would put the section's work in order without the help of people who had such a poor opinion of him, how he would get rid of all the things that were hindering good work at present. Andrei talked about getting authority by deeds. He would earn that authority, he would do things so well that the best workers in the shop would ask to be in his section.

He came to with a jerk when Dusya addressed him at the end of the discussion.

"Have you anything more to say about the order, Nikolai Nikolayevich?"

"Only one thing. We're all very proud that our section has been entrusted with this job. We'll make a good job of it, all right. All the practical suggestions the comrades have made will be taken into account . . . so will all serious criticism. . . . As for the personal grudges, I consider we should pay no attention to them."

"Right you are," called Yasha. "We ought to work and not keep taking offence. Some people have too high an opinion of themselves."

For some reason Nikolai found Yasha's support unwelcome. He noticed how contemptuously Dusya had looked at him and how Stoletov had asked Kovalev something with his eyes on Yasha; how the girl in the white beret who was sitting next to Yasha had edged as far away from him as possible. Yasha was not liked, wasn't respected in the factory. When the meeting broke up and people went home in groups or in twos and threes, Yasha slunk off alone.

"Meet you in an hour. On the bank near the weir," whispered Dusya to Andrei as she left the shop. "We can stay out all night if you like. Coming?"

Andrei had heard that Dusya had a boat and that she had invited Nikolai and Yuri Sharov for a trip. "I invited Lyuba, too, but she doesn't want to come," Dusya told him. "Maybe she'd change her mind if you asked her."

Dusya looked at Andrei curiously. How would he take her hint? Andrei took it well; he said he would try to persuade Lyuba but hadn't much hope.

He dropped in at the Comsomol committee rooms several times, he tried to catch Lyuba on the 'phone in the shops; but she was nowhere

to be found. As a result they had made no plans, and now Andrei found himself sitting with Nikolai in the canteen ordering supper and keeping his eyes open for Lyuba.

They ate in silence. Nikolai felt upset about the meeting: once again that shyness of his had let him down, he'd said nothing when he ought to have spoken. He'd had some ideas but he hadn't expressed them, he hadn't felt sure enough they were right. But one thing he'd decided firmly in his own mind—he would put Yasha on the most difficult job. Let Yasha show how he could work. Nikolai wanted Andrei to question him about the new order, about how the meeting had gone. He suspected that Vanya Poperechny had already passed on to Andrei what the older workers had said.

But Andrei's thoughts were elsewhere. Why didn't Lyuba want to go out with him on the lake? Why did she always find some excuse for turning down his invitations to go out walking or into town together, or even to the cinema?

Maybe she had some admirer that she spent her time with? But who could it be? She often went to town, spent the night there. She went there practically every Sunday. Who did she meet there?

After tea Andrei walked down to the lake with Nikolai. They found Dusya and Yuri Sharov waiting near the boat.

Tucking up her frock, Dusya ran to the boat, jumped in and took the oars.

"I'll row," she said, pushing the boat out towards the weir. "Take your seats, all of you."

With strong adroit sweeps she rowed the boat from the shore. The middle of the lake was still bathed in sunshine, and glowed like molten iron. Nearer the shore the water was blue, then deep indigo and finally, under the trees, quite black. Andrei who was lying in the stern gazed back at the houses. The scents of the forest were wafted to the boat from the shore: the warm scent of pine trees on which the sun had poured all day, the smell of hay, a clammy smell from the marsh. On a hilly rise stood the buildings of the housing estate, lit up by the sun.

Lyuba was there somewhere. What was she doing? Andrei clearly saw her tender smiling eyes, her face sweet as a wild rose. . . . His heart was aflutter. As a distraction he took the oars from Dusya. The boat shot ahead through the gathering dusk. Lights flashed on the high land where the factory and the houses stood.

2

It was Dusya's fault that Lyuba hadn't gone on the boat trip.

Inviting Lyuba she said: "Someone's going to be very disappointed if you don't."

Dusya scanned Lyuba's face, curious to know how she would react. Lyuba was involuntarily taken aback and said coldly: "I don't understand. What're you hinting?"

"Oh, well, if you don't you don't. . . . By the way, wouldn't it be a good idea to call our paper the *Tribune of the Comsomol Committee*?"

"D'you mean it shouldn't print so much about the Comsomol?"

"I didn't say that, did I? It'd be interesting to know what a certain assembly worker who happens to be away thought of the last issue. Wonder if he saw it?"

The hint was too broad to be missed. Lyuba blushed, dropped her eyes and walked off. She dawdled a moment and then, feeling that the colour had left her cheeks, went on, meaning to find out how work was proceeding on the oil workers' order.

Lyuba did not go on the boat trip; to punish herself she spent the whole evening going round the hostels, seeing how the improvements recommended by the Party bureau were being put into effect. But there was nobody in; on such a fine warm evening everyone had gone off somewhere.

On her way home she glanced up at the window of Andrei's room. It was dark; so they hadn't come back from the lake yet.

"What do I care whether they're back or not?" Lyuba murmured. She felt annoyed with herself. They could row the whole night for all she cared.

But next morning she was impatient to find out how Andrei had taken her absence. Andrei, however, as if to spite her, did not drop in at the committee room. Thinking up a pretext for a conversation—that the paper was not taking enough interest in seeing that spare-time activities were properly organized in the hostels—she set off for the *Tribuna* office. But Andrei was not there.

"He's gone round the shops," Vanya told her. "Perhaps I can help you."

"No, thanks. I'll ring later."

She rang several times and at last found Andrei in. He told her that he would come over at once. He sounded delighted.

"Pity you didn't come with us yesterday. It was so lovely on the lake. Maybe you'll be free tomorrow evening."

But Lyuba declined. She had to drive to town to return the car her father had lent her for a week—a week that had turned into over a month.

"Splendid," said Andrei. "Will you take me with you? Oh, please do, Lyuba."

Lyuba did not need pressing. She agreed at once, and told Andrei to be outside the Stalingrad at seven sharp the next morning—a Sunday.

Shortly before sunrise, when a heavy dew still lay on the grass, Lyuba hurried to the garage. The small dark-blue Moskvich stood in a corner, right up against the wall; dusty tip-lorries and other factory vehicles blocked the way out. The Moskvich looked forlorn and quite unprepossessing.

So there you are, thought Lyuba as she pushed between the lorries. How on earth am I going to get you out of here?

She took a rag and polished the car's dusty body. The sunshine danced on the lacquer.

The rag soon became dirty and only smeared the dust. And Lyuba so much wanted to reach the Stalingrad with the car looking its best. She took a bucket from one of the lorries, filled it to the brim and, taking care not to spill any water on her dress or white shoes, carried it carefully to the Moskvich.

"No sense in washing it that way," said a young man in dark overalls, appearing from behind a lorry. "Drive into the yard and we'll have the hose on it."

"How am I going to get it there?" Lyuba asked sharply. "Fly it?"

She wrung out the rag, wiped the wind-screen, then polished it with

a crumpled newspaper and got into the car to see whether the glass was clean. It was as transparent as a mountain stream. Glancing through it, Lyuba saw the man walking towards the doors.

So he was going to leave her in this trap. She'd have to find the garage manager and ask for help. . . .

She slipped out of the car and went on with her polishing. Suddenly she heard an engine spring to life in front of her. Quiet at first, it soon filled the whole garage with its roar; then a lorry moved. And then lorry after lorry pulled out of the garage, a way began to be cleared in front of the Moskvich and finally the clay-smeared back of the tip-lorry immediately before the car's bonnet shot forward. The young man leaned out of the driver's cabin, waved his hand and beckoned to Lyuba to follow him.

Lyuba rinsed her hands quickly under the tap, sat behind the wheel and scanned her face in the driving-mirror. Everything was in order: her hair, with which she had taken a lot of trouble, was none the worse, her eyebrows were neat, her face looked fresh and clean. The car moved smoothly from the half light of the garage into the bright sunshine and out of the factory yard through the wide-open gates.

The sun shone straight into Lyuba's eyes. She put on dark glasses, though a glance in the driving-mirror was enough to make her decide to take them off before she reached the Stalingrad. She could see the white building in the distance, its windows glistening in the sunlight and Andrei standing on the edge of the pavement.

"I've been here half-an-hour," said Andrei as he took his place beside Lyuba. "I was beginning to think you'd gone without me. . . . I say, you do look pretty today," he added with a glance at her. "Stunning."

Lyuba smiled and held her tongue. She drove with assurance, her small sun-burned hands resting lightly on the wheel, her eyes on the road. She blew the horn loudly not only at pedestrians but at every cat, goat or chicken that strayed on to the road. She carefully avoided every pot-hole and bump.

"If Dad finds the least thing wrong with the car, I'm in for it," she admitted to Andrei. "He's awfully careful and likes others to be too."

She explained how her father had bought the car. He'd been given a bonus at the factory for an invention; first, he'd wanted to get a motor boat, but he'd given in to Lyuba and her brother and bought this car. Soon afterwards, however, her brother bought himself a motor bike and lost all interest in the car.

"So the car's really mine," said Lyuba. "All the same we call it Dad's. He lets me have it for driving into town and for trips, but I've got to keep it in order."

"Sounds as if you're a bit afraid of your father." Somehow, Andrei felt pleased that Lyuba took her father's wishes into account.

"I am, a bit," said Lyuba. "He's pretty strict with us. He's a fitter like Dusya Syurtukova's father, only *he's* got a soft heart and Dad's is like a piece of flint."

Before long they saw the small dark tower of a fire station rising on the high ground before them; an old church with thick poplars in front of it flashed by; the car ran along a straight cobbled road. There were two women waiting for a bus, with big baskets of vegetables between them.

The white curtains in the windows of the houses were drawn—people were not yet up this Sunday morning and only the dogs were awake, dashing from the gates at the car and trotting back with lazy barks.

The old village was soon left behind, and now they were running past forest-clad hills. There was an occasional cottage on the roadside but the lanes that ran up into the forest were deserted, obviously used but rarely, for they were overgrown with grass, and young pines and birches were sprouting right up to the verges.

"I'd love to go up one of those lanes and see where it leads to," said Andrei. "We might get to somewhere interesting. . . ."

Lyuba did not reply but the colour rushed to her cheeks. Andrei edged his hand up to hers; the car swerved and almost ran off the road. But Lyuba quickly regained control; a little farther on she noticed a lane that ran into deep forest, and turned into it.

"Move your hand, please," she said. "I can't drive properly."

Her tone was formal but her expression—slightly confused and ill-at-ease—did not match it. Andrei withdrew his hand humbly and stared at the lane ahead as hard as Lyuba was doing. The lane climbed steeply, then made a sudden turn and narrowed to run between the trees; then it reached a bridge of rough logs over a stream.

"Don't you think we'd better ford it?" Andrei asked. "I'll get out and see whether it's all right."

Lyuba, however, did not stop; she resolutely drove down the sandy bank into the water. The car splashed through the stream, reached the other bank and stuck in the sand.

"That's that," said Lyuba, and switched off the engine. "Now we shall have to push."

They stepped out of the car into a quiet world. No sound was to be heard except the murmur of the stream breaking over the stones, the songs of the birds and the chirp of grasshoppers. Huge pines stood motionless on the rocky hill slopes. Not a leaf rustled on the thick bushes besides the stream. A meadow of tall grass, untouched and brilliant with large bright flowers, stretched there.

"We ought to pick some flowers," said Lyuba. "The only trouble is they'll wilt before we got to town."

"We can wrap some damp grass round the stems," said Andrei. "I'll go and pick some."

He was prepared to pick all the flowers in the meadow, to lift the car on his shoulders, to climb the highest tree in order to find out how far they were from the town, to do anything that would please Lyuba. He stood before her, awaiting her command. But no command came.

Lyuba was sitting on a boulder beside the stream. Her eyes were shut as she raised her face to the sun. She looked so lovely that Andrei could not resist bending down and kissing the soft slightly-parted lips.

A blow under the chin sent him reeling several paces back. Lyuba stood before him, fists clenched, ready to deal him another blow.

"What d'you think you're doing?" she said in a low voice, and the lips which had just been parted so tenderly were now closed in a tight angry line. "D'you want another? I warn you, I took boxing lessons once."

"So did I," said Andrei, still in retreat. "But I don't know why you should choose to practise on me!"

"In case you get the idea every girl's ready to fall into your arms."
"I don't want that," Andrei said calmly. "I'm interested only in you, Lyuba."

"And has it occurred to you to ask yourself whether I'm interested in you?" asked Lyuba. Her fists were still clenched.

"You looked so pretty with your face tilted up like that. I couldn't help it."

"Well, good-bye. I'm going to drop you here. You'd better cool your passions by having a bathe. There's a deep pool a bit lower down."

She got back into the car, switched on the ignition and pressed the starter. The car did not move. The back wheels were firmly embedded in the sand; the front ones were wedged up against the steep grassy bank. Andrei watched Lyuba's futile attempts to get the car moving, but offered no help. He hated the idea of her leaving him.

He turned in the direction where Lyuba said he could bathe and walked through the tall grass. He reached a place beyond the bushes where the stream suddenly widened and formed a pool. Stones had been laid to form a rough dam. Over the almost motionless water dark blue moths fluttered; white willow-down floated on its surface. On the other side of the pool stretched a low sandy bank, but where Andrei stood the bank was steep and grass-clad.

He picked up a long stick and measured the depth. It did not touch bottom. Andrei stripped to his shorts and dived in. The water felt icy cold as he went under. He swam a little but soon found himself in shallows. The water was warmer there; the sun reached down right to the sandy bed of the pool.

Andrei floated on his back, listening for the sound of the car's engine. But he heard nothing except the buzz of a gadfly that was circling over his exposed shoulders.

"Andrei! Andrei! Where are you?"

It was Lyuba. She sounded some way off.

Then her voice drew nearer and he caught glimpses of her dress through the bushes. The bushes parted and there she was on the bank.

"Why didn't you answer?" she asked, catching her breath. "I was beginning to think you'd got lost."

"I decided to drown myself but it's not deep enough here," said Andrei, splashing with his feet.

Lyuba sat down on the grass, tucking her feet under her. She looked worried but not in the least angry. Glancing at her watch, she said that the car was well stuck and that they would have to get help.

"Looks as if we'll have to walk back to the main road and ask a lorry driver to come up here. That's enough of enjoying yourself, Andrei," she added, sounding slightly vexed. "Come out, please, and don't let me have to walk to the road by myself."

But Andrei would have none of this. They could shift the car themselves.

"That sardine tin of yours isn't going to beat a couple of sportsmen boxers too! It'd be a disgrace."

He clambered on to the bank, picked up his clothes and crossed the meadow. The tall grass tickled his legs, the gadfly was still after him, trying to sting his bare back, the sun was rapidly drying his wet hair.



Lyuba walked beside him, telling him how she had tried to get the car out by putting it into reverse but that the wheels had only sunk in deeper.

"We'll have to try and dig her out," she said. "If only we had some planks or branches to put under the wheels."

They found what they were looking for quite close by—somebody else had run into trouble here, it seemed. Using a length of plank instead of a spade, Andrei dug round the deeply embedded back wheels and slipped branches under them. He broke off some boughs, dragged several flat stones out to the stream and laid them across the sand right up to the bank.

"Get in, Comrade Chauffeur, and drive in reverse while I push."

By their combined efforts they got the car back across the stream and on to firm ground. Lyuba turned it round and drove back along the lane. Now they were ready to resume their journey; but Lyuba reminded Andrei of his promise to gather her a bunch of flowers.

They picked the flowers without a word. In silence Lyuba arranged them in a bunch. In silence Andrei gathered some dock-weed and wrapped

it round the stems. The silence was strained and unnatural. Lyuba was the first to break it.

"Are you still angry with me?" she asked. "That would be funny and silly."

"No, I'm not angry," said Andrei, looking at Lyuba's face bent over the flowers. "But I'm not particularly happy to know that you don't like me."

"Don't like you?" echoed Lyuba, darting a glance at him. "If I didn't like you I wouldn't have asked you to come with me today. . . . But I want to tell you once and for all that I despise girls who let anybody kiss them. A kiss is a sign of great trust, and I'm not one to make light of that trust. That's all I want to say. No, not quite all," she added hesitantly, "I'm sorry I hit you."

"That's perfectly all right," said Andrei glumly, and he opened the door of the car. "Please get in, Comrade Chauffeur."

Before reaching the town, Lyuba stopped at a roadside water-trough and washed the car down again: and when they drove into the yard of the house where her father lived, the Moskvich shone like new: the glass was clean, the blue paintwork was as bright as a corn-flower and from the driving-mirror hung a bunch of flowers.

But all Lyuba's work was wasted; her father was not in. The key of the flat lay in the usual hiding-place—the letter-box.

"I wanted my people to meet you," said Lyuba. "but they've probably gone out for the day."

She opened the front door. The wireless had been left on and filled the flat with muffled sounds; a blackberry tart, still warm from the oven, stood on the kitchen table; the coffee pot stood on the electric ring.

"We'll treat ourselves to what's left," said Lyuba, plugging in the ring. "Watch the coffee doesn't boil over while I go and change."

Lyuba's wardrobe was in two parts—her "factory" clothes and her "home" clothes. She took out a pretty silk frock, slipped it on and slid her bare feet into a pair of high-heeled patent-leather shoes. Glancing into the mirror, she tidied her hair and wondered how to make herself prettier. A flower in the hair, perhaps. . . . But the flowers were in the car.

She turned round and noticed a half-blown rose. Without second thoughts she plucked it and tucked it into her hair. Another glance in the mirror reassured her that the effect was successful. She went to Andrei.

Andrei was still sitting where she had left him. The coffee was on the boil.

"Look at that," said Lyuba, nodding at the jet of steam shooting out of the coffee pot. "I gave you a serious job to do. What are you dreaming of?"

"You," said Andrei, "you're lovely. But, oh so detached—now I don't dare come near you."

"Well, go on sitting where I put you," said Lyuba, taking cups and saucers out. "Let's have some coffee and then go to the park and listen to music. We must make the most of our opportunities now we're in town."

When the time came for Nikolai to start distributing the work on the new order, he ran into trouble straight away.

He had allotted the most difficult work to Yasha Milovidov. Yasha studied the blue print, saw the nature of the job and asked Nikolai to give him something easier or, as he put it, "more worth while." Nikolai refused, whereupon Yasha smirked, picked up the blue print and at the end of the day turned in a completely spoiled part.

It was plain that Yasha had spoiled the job deliberately, but it was impossible to prove. So when Yasha came up and asked with a simper whether the foreman was going to free him from any further work on the order, Nikolai said no, and, moreover, that he expected Yasha to do a perfect job the next day.

Nikolai told nobody about this incident—not even Andrei. Andrei learned of it when he noticed that Nikolai's section was at the bottom of the list in the progress report. As soon as he saw this he hurried to Nikolai.

Nikolai met him truculently and told him that all the trouble was due to initial difficulties in organization and that these would be overcome in no time.

"Put anything you think necessary about me in the paper," Nikolai said drily. "In our shop wall-newspaper I was shown sitting on the back of a tortoise. You could repeat that highly original symbol in the *Tribuna*..."

It occurred to Nikolai that a copy of the *Tribuna* might fall into his mother's hands, for Andrei went on sending a copy of each issue to Moscow. His mother had written to tell him how she and Andrei's father read the paper and tried to picture the way their sons were living from its contents.

With some irritation Nikolai thought about his father. Were it not for that letter of recommendation he could have gone to the shop manager, spoken frankly to him and asked for help with those things he could not manage himself. But that letter had spoiled everything: Kovalev would think he wanted a favour.

He came back from work that day feeling very upset. He tried to keep his mind off shop; but it was no good, he kept seeing that ugly part Yasha had spoiled, and with it the angry face of Yelena Protasova, and Dusya's sarcastic smile, when she saw the caricature of Nikolai on the tortoise.

He could not stop thinking of Yasha. He must go to look for him at once and thrash the matter out with him. He would tell Yasha he would no longer cover up his faults and would, in fact, do all he could to expose them. It would be a different matter, of course, if Yasha acknowledged his faults and made an effort to keep up the honour of the section.

However, Yasha was not so easily found. He was not home—a young woman with a baby in her arms told him that he had gone off without saying where. The woman's face looked worried. Over her shoulder Nikolai saw on old man—her father, probably—looking at him with disapproval. So you're one of my son-in-law's pals, that look seemed to say. A little boy with a Young Pioneer tie, who was watering the flower-beds,

also looked at Nikolai truculently. Yasha's brother, perhaps, or the brother of his wife.

"Have a look for him near the pub," the lad yelled after Nikolai in a high shrill voice. "He went to get something to freshen himself up. Needed it after last night's boozing."

Yasha was not in the pub but in the garden outside the factory, basking in the sun. Catching sight of Nikolai, he removed a green leaf that he had laid over his nose, sat up on the bench and gleefully invited Nikolai to sit beside him. He had got rid of his hang-over and felt jovial, in fact.

"Aha, the foreman! My humble and respectful greetings," he cried. "Don't be surprised at the leaf. It's just a bit of dock-leaf. I put it over my nose not to get burned. A little lady I know taught me that."

Nikolai did not sit down. He cast a morose look at the light-hearted Yasha. He did not want to sit down there where people might pass by; he preferred to talk to Yasha somewhere more secluded, where there were no witnesses.

Yasha, however, did not want to leave the garden. He sprawled on the bench and put the leaf back over his nose. He was dressed to kill: light grey trousers with a knife-edge crease, well polished shoes, a dazzling white silk shirt. His closely-shaven cheeks were free from scratches or bruises. He smiled. He felt fine. He wished no man ill. He was even ready to do somebody a good turn.

"Sit down," he said, invitingly. "Or is it too hot for you here? We can go into the shade, if you like. Let's have some beer; they've got a new barrel in the pub. On ice."

But Nikolai did not want to drink. He suggested a walk in the park. Yasha threw away his leaf and rose from the bench.

"Anything you like, to please a friend," he said. "I put friendship before anything else in the world."

Yasha wanted to keep the conversation at this elevated level. He would like to have spoken of friendship, of self-sacrifice, of devotion. He flung his arm over Nikolai's shoulder, humming a tune.

"Oh, Nik, Nik. If you only knew how I feel."

Nikolai wrenched himself free.

"There's no point in letting everybody see you're tight," he said angrily. "I'm not going to help you keep on your feet."

Yasha's face clouded. Thrusting his hands in his pockets, he stood stock-still, like a wild beast about to spring, and blocked Nikolai's path.

"If you were drunk I'd not only help to keep you on your feet, I'd carry you on my own back. You're friends only when it suits you."

He spoke mildly but an angry spark burned in his eyes and there was a spiteful smile on his lips. Nikolai felt like letting out at him, but he restrained the impulse.

"I'm not going to have a scene with you in the middle of the square," he said. "Let's go to the park."

They walked together through the streets, meeting various people they knew. Nikolai felt the disapproving looks. Fine friends! One of them already reeling, the other half seas over to judge by that red face of his. It was shameful, but Nikolai kept on walking beside Yasha.

In the park Yasha dropped on to the grass beneath the trailing branches of a birch tree. The elbows of his white shirt were immediately stained with green. Nikolai thought of the young woman with the baby

in her arms; she would have to wash that shirt. Somehow the sight of those green patches heightened Nikolai's aversion to Yasha. He sat down on a tree-stump a little way off.

"It's nice here," said Yasha with a contented sigh as he settled down on the grass. "Why don't you lie down, Nik? The grass feels so soft and cool. Like being at home on a sofa."

But Nikolai had not come to rest but to have it out with Yasha. He went straight to the point: was Yasha going to work so that the section could pull itself up from the bottom place or not? Nikolai was on edge but managed to keep himself under control. He spoke in a matter-of-fact voice, and this disarmed Yasha.

"D'you want to know what I think?" said Yasha. "All right. I think we ought to drop the order. What are we going to get out of it? Let Yuri handle it. He likes to lick the management's boots. We ought to take on something lighter. There are some easier orders, I know."

Warming to his subject, Yasha sat up and grasped his knees. Nikolai again noticed the green stains on the shirt-sleeves. He turned his head away so as not to have to look at them.

"I don't know what the others would say if we dropped that order," he answered drily. "They all voted for taking it on. They're all doing their best. It's a matter of honour for them."

"I don't care a damn what they think," Yasha broke in. He had failed to notice Nikolai's tone. "You're the foreman; it's for you to decide. Think of yourself, of what's good for you. What's a fellow want out of life, after all? Decent clothes to wear, a good time with something to drink, and a girl of his own. That's all that matters."

Yasha declaimed his philosophy of life with enthusiasm. It was not a complicated philosophy but its realization required money; hence, Yasha had to work, to work enough to get money for everything. For that his work had to be "worth while" not something he had to rack his brains over.

"People tell me I don't do anything to improve production. But I'm not against improvements. No, not at all—when they're in my own interest. But when I hear talk about the honour of the section or about putting the interests of the state first, then I'm against improvements. Who starts all that talk? Characters like Nazarenko. For him the chief thing is the honour, so he does his best for the state. What I say is the state's rich enough without Nazarenko's help. The state's got plenty and it's not going to feel any the poorer because Yasha Milovidov earns a bit more. For me an odd thousand roubles is money, but for the state it's a mere flea-bite. I want a quiet life, I don't like worries; they don't do anybody any good."

And to emphasize his desire for tranquillity, Yasha rolled back on to the grass and shut his eyes. He looked like a big cat that has grown skinny from its antics on the tiles and is being stroked by a soft-hearted owner who gives him the daintiest morsels, not realizing that he is only a parasite.

"What a rotter you are," Nikolai muttered, unable to conceal his contempt and hate. "A real rotter." He stood up. He felt like gripping Yasha by the scruff of the neck and dragging him out of the shade of the birch tree, out of the park. What right had Yasha to use that birch tree's shade, that park, the very air that decent people breathed?

But Yasha, apparently, did not appreciate the way Nikolai felt on these matters. He opened his eyes, stretched and asked: "Who are you getting at? Me? Is that all the thanks I get for my friendly advice?"

Nikolai's expression boded nothing but ill for Yasha: his brows were furrowed, his lips closed in a tight line, his eyes glared with anger. He stood ready for a fight: fists clenched, elbows swinging freely at his side, feet firmly planted.

Still smiling, Yasha suddenly leaped up, taut as a spring. He raised his fists and lunged at Nikolai who returned the blow with one at Yasha's chest. Now they were really fighting. Yasha's arms threshed the air as they tried to reach Nikolai's face; he went on smiling as though everything was a friendly joke.

Someone came up behind Nikolai and grasped him by the elbows.

"Let go," shouted Nikolai without turning round. "Let me give the swine what he deserves."

He tried to wrench his elbows free but the grip on them was firm. Yasha looked taken aback. At last Nikolai turned his head; the man who held him so firmly was Stoletov. On the path two little boys looking exactly alike in blue shorts stood with fishing-rods on their shoulders. They were watching the scene with intense interest.

"That's enough," said Stoletov calmly. "Come along with me."

He freed Nikolai's elbows, slipped an arm through his, and led him to the path.

"We're going to the lake and you're coming too," he said to Nikolai. "Let's take this path. We're not likely to meet anybody this way. Doesn't do for a foreman to be seen the way you look."

Nikolai glanced back. Yasha stood leaning against the birch tree, wiping his face with his sleeve. Now there were other stains on the sleeve—red stains.

H'm he'd managed to land a few, thought Nikolai. Yasha had something to remember him by.

Stoletov led him to the lake along a narrow path. In front, glancing round from time to time, walked the twins. The floats that bobbed from the rods over their shoulders were home-made, just pieces of cork with black thread instead of cut-gut. Difficult to imagine anyone catching a real fish with that tackle. But the little boys looked happy enough; it wasn't often they went fishing with their Daddy. They seemed to like Nikolai; their eyes were full of hero-worship when they looked at him.

Funny, but those glances the boys threw him made Nikolai feel happy. Stoletov walked on in silence, his arm still through Nikolai's. He seemed to know the narrow shady path, for he walked on with assurance.

When they reached the lake, he told the boys to climb to the top of a high boulder that jutted into the water some way off.

"The fish always bite best there," he told them. "Go and sit on that rock and keep quiet. If you chatter the fish'll get the wind up and you'll not catch one." He handed one boy a tin of worms and the other a basket for any fish they caught. Then he sat down on the sand in the shade of a bushy alder tree. The boys went off rather reluctantly to the rock.

"It'd do you good to have a swim. You can rinse your shirt out too,"

Stoletov said to Nikolai. "Wait a minute, I'll get you some soap. We've got a cache for such things here."

He parted the bushes and brought out a tin soap-box.

"Here you are. But go a little farther along the bank or you'll drive all the fish away from the kids."

Nikolai kicked off his shoes and walked to the edge of the water. Then he slipped behind a bush, stripped and began to wash his shirt. The stains were hard to get rid of; not sparing his hands, he rubbed the shirt hard with soap and sand.

"The sun'll look after the rest," he muttered, and ran into the water. As he swam and let the waves slap against his face, he felt his swollen nose hurt. His feet found bottom and he tried to see his reflection in the water, but the wind was rippling the surface too much. By feeling his nose he could tell that it really had grown bigger. How was he going to turn up for work the next day, he wondered, and felt ashamed. He would have to put a cold compress on it. Wasn't that the best cure for bruises?

Returning to the bank, he took his partly-dried shirt, dipped it in the water and pressed it against his nose.

"Too late now," he heard Stoletov say.

"Do I look awful?" he asked.

"Pretty bad," said Stoletov. "Your nose is swollen and you've got a real beauty of an eye. Never mind, you'll live to see a better day."



He laid a hand on Nikolai's shoulder, drew him to his feet and led him to the little bay where the children sat perched on their rock. Nikolai spread his damp shirt to dry on the bushes and sat down beside Stoletov on the sand.

"Now tell me what it was all about," said Stoletov.

The little boys had long scampered off home with a few fish; but Nikolai still went on talking to Stoletov. He had not said anything about

Yasha yet, and did not really want to. He was talking about his work in the turnery, about his quarrels with the older workers, about the mess he had made of things so that he was at the bottom of the list in the paper.

"You're a friend of the editor's, aren't you?" Stoletov asked.

"Yes, we've known each other since we were kids."

"Didn't you feel sore when he wrote that your section was last?"

"Of course not," said Nikolai, perplexed by Stoletov's question.

"After all, we were last, weren't we?"

"And what happened between you and Milovidov?" asked Stoletov.

"What was there between you that could only be settled by fighting?"

Nikolai avoided answering that question. He said that the fight was his fault, entirely his fault. As for the reasons, well, they would be removed.

"That's good." Stoletov did not press for details but told Nikolai that he should not antagonize those workers who were his senior in age and experience.

"It'll save you a lot of trouble if you get on better with them," he went on. "The quicker you sort yourselves out the better you'll work. I know it's not pleasant to have to admit a job you've been given is too much for you. But it's even less pleasant to come a cropper on that job. You have a first-class, thoroughly experienced engineer as your shop manager. What's more, in your own section you've got someone you'd find hard to match anywhere—I mean Yelena Protasova. If you find you can't get on with anybody, consult her about it. She'll not take advantage of it. She'll give you some good advice, I'm sure."

How could he consult Protasova? Why, she knew how close he was with Yasha and blamed him for it. She probably thought him no better than Yasha.

"And now get dressed and come and have dinner with us," said Stoletov. "We'll probably have to eat my boys' catch."

A swollen nose and a crumpled shirt you'd just washed in the lake and, incidentally, torn during the process, were not the most suitable get-up for paying your first visit to people you didn't know, but the Stoletovs seemed so glad to meet him that Nikolai soon felt quite at his ease. The only time he was put out was when Ivan Konstantinovich came to table with his severe expression, his scrupulously clean white jacket which looked as if it had just been starched, his unhurried careful movements.

The old man did not reply to Nikolai's greeting.

"Father, we've a guest," Varya said loudly. "Engineer Nikolai Nikolayevich Zhukov."

Ivan Konstantinovich looked hard at Nikolai, smiled and put out a hand.

"An engineer and so young," he said. "I'm sorry, I didn't notice you. I thought you were some pal of the youngsters."

Vanya and Demyan looked at Nikolai with wonder and admiration—what a fight he'd put up. He'd drawn blood. And there was Grandad taking him for the next-door-neighbour's boy. Grandad was beginning to see so badly; really, he ought to have a new pair of spectacles. The twins tried to sit nearer to Nikolai but their mother pointed to the other end of the table and Nikolai sat down beside Stoletov.

After dinner Stoletov picked up the telephone and asked someone whether he was free.

"You are? Splendid. Perhaps you'd drop in for a little. I've got somebody you know with me. He wants your advice about something."

A few minutes later Kovalev entered the garden. He wore a white shirt and gym shoes, and held a new volleyball under his arm. Putting the ball on the bench, he began to walk up and down the path with Stoletov and Nikolai. The three of them talked for a long time. Ivan and Demyan sat patiently on the bench each side of the ball. It was a beautiful ball, the leather was so fine, it would be lovely to kick about.

Ivan's elbow accidentally touched the ball which rolled on to the grass. And there it lay until Demyan stuck out a leg and gave it the gentlest little kick with the tip of his shoe. The ball began to roll down the slope, followed by the little boys. Perhaps it would have stopped rolling had not some stones, flown from the feet of its pursuers, speed it on its way.

"We ought to have asked them," said Demyan.

"What for? It just rolled off, didn't it?"

"Nobody meant to touch it."

"Let's call Volodya. He'll be at the gate."

They didn't have to call Volodya. He appeared of his own accord, picked up the ball and dashed with the twins to a space where two birch trees served as goal-posts. Volodya ran to the goal, booted the ball, and the game began.

The visitors were not to be seen when the boys returned home. "So you took the ball? What are you thinking of?" said their mother.

"It rolled away by itself," said Demyan, turning a pair of innocent eyes on her. "We just caught it up and played with it a bit..."

"Where's Nikolai Nikolayevich, Mummy?" asked Ivan.

"He's gone home. Now, if you hadn't taken the ball, he'd have stayed and played with you. Now they've all gone away. I'm going out too in a minute. Off to bed with you."

The boys went on to the porch. Varya hurried after her husband. He had gone to the park where there was a band performance, dancing and a concert. Varya could see him standing among a large group of young people near the dance floor.

"Here I am," he called to her. "Come and rescue your old man. The girls say I've got to dance. They just don't believe I can't."

"It's true, he can't," said Varya, slipping her arm through her husband's. "I've tried to teach him but it's no good. We'll sit down and watch you girls dance."

They sat on a seat near the band; the young people streamed on to the floor. The band was playing a waltz; Varya watched the couples glide past them, girl dancing with girl, boy with boy.

"Why do they dance like that?" Varya asked. "Why don't the boys invite the girls to dance with them?"

"They're mere kids, really," said Stoletov. "Still a bit bashful.... Now, there's a couple for you, look."

He nodded towards Lyuba and Andrei. Andrei held his partner firmly and kept his eyes fixed on her up-tilted face as they waltzed together. There was a tender, submissive, devoted look on Lyuba's face—a look quite unusual for her. But then Andrei said something and her expression changed immediately; she tossed her head and averted her eyes while a stubborn look came to her face.

The band stopped, then plunged into a mazurka.

"Go and ask Dusya for a dance. I want to sit this one out," said Lyuba and made for one of the benches.

Andrei invited Dusya, and they began to dance. It seemed to Andrei that whereas the waltz had been far too short, the mazurka was going on for ever. They had circled the floor many times; someone had come to stand right in front of the bench where Lyuba sat so that Andrei could not see what she was doing. Surely Dusya must be tired of dancing? The band played with more and more fire, the tempo mounted to a climax—these must be the final bars. Andrei steered Dusya round the floor nearer to Lyuba's bench. The music ended, the dance was over. Dusya dabbed at her cheeks with a handkerchief.

"Thank you," said Andrei, and swung round at once to the bench. Lyuba was not there, only Nikolai and Yuri. He went to look for Lyuba. He looked to see whether she was still on the floor. He eyed every couple. He walked past all the benches around the dance floor. He looked up the near-by paths and into the open-air library; the verandah was deserted; the wind rustled among the newspapers and magazines. Lyuba was nowhere to be found.

From then on, Andrei found everything dull and uninteresting; the music sounded shrill and got on his nerves, the lamps looked unnecessarily gaudy against the green foliage, the lake made the air cold and clammy. Andrei walked out of the park, making a detour to pass Lyuba's window. The window was open; the wind played with the white curtains.

After a few moments of vigil Andrei looked around and threw a pebble at the window. The pebble hit the frame hard, but nobody appeared from behind the curtains. Only a chance passer-by cast him a wondering glance.

Chapter Eleven

1

A meeting had been convened to discuss the work of the young engineers. The chief engineer made his report: so many young qualified workers in the factory as a whole, so many in each shop and so on. Some worked better than average, others worse. Foreman Nikolai Zhukov, for example, was working badly, foreman Yuri Sharov well. It might be better to transfer Zhukov to the lab or to another department; Zhukov's shop-manager, however, was against the idea for some reason and went on experimenting to the disadvantage of output.

Nobody was satisfied with the report. A violent discussion broke out immediately. Some charged the chief engineer with neglecting to provide young engineers with any guidance or with failing to insist that the shop and department managers give that guidance. The chief engineer's report was unworthy of the name—it was nothing but a statistical statement, and that just about summed up his attitude to the young engineers.

"There's nothing wrong with the young people who come to work here," said Syurtukov. "They're eager to work and make themselves useful. The trouble is they've no experience. Now, take Zhukov, the young fellow who's been mentioned this evening. I've had my eye on him since

the day he arrived. Wanted to see how he'd shape. He's a touchy lad. Likes to do everything his own way. So, of course, he makes mistakes—technical mistakes, and what I might call psychological ones. But what do the older comrades do? Just stand by and watch and wonder how the poor fellow's going to manage. If he makes a good job of it, all for the good. If not, then it's the end of him as far as this section's concerned. Hasn't that been your attitude? Instead of going to the lad and asking him if he wants help."

"He can always ask for help himself if he feels he can't manage," said the chief engineer.

"He can. But, don't forget, we're sometimes a bit touchy too, when it's quite unnecessary. I'll give you an example. This is what happened in Zhukov's section. Two turners took offence at something their young foreman did, and went to work in another shop. Said Zhukov had offended them by showing he favoured a fellow of his own age. Trying to wangle a flat for him. So they decide to walk out on him—like the opposition in a bourgeois parliament."

There was general laughter. But one of the turners whom Syurtukov was referring to shouted from the back of the hall: "Why should I bow and scrape before a mere lad like him? 'Specially as he's so partial to bad company. He's too chummy with that Yasha Milovidov."

"And whose fault's that?" Syurtukov was quite calm. "While you were playing the poor insulted man, Yasha was offering Zhukov his sympathy. He wasn't like the older workers; oh no, he was Zhukov's friend. He'd support him. In my opinion a young worker ought to be able to rely on the support of every social organization in the shops. If that were so, these lads with special training would settle down into the life of the factory all the sooner."

Sharov spoke next.

"There's been talk here about young qualified workers not getting enough help," he began. "I want to speak about something else, though. It's this. In my opinion our young people are not sufficiently self-reliant. They're coddled too much, not given enough chance to take the initiative themselves. That's because there's not enough confidence put in them. Because the older people think something like this: 'I've had the same education as any of these youngsters and besides that I've worked so many years in production. I've got the experience and the knowledge of life, so it follows that I'm the one to take the initiative and it's up to the youngsters to put my initiative into practice.' Some of our older comrades, if they don't mind my saying so, forget sometimes that science, especially technical science, is never at a standstill, is always forging ahead. Laws they considered in their student days to be immutable aren't laws any longer."

Both Andrei and the chief engineer were taking careful notes of this speech. Andrei had decided to devote a page of the paper to the problem of young engineers. He would ask Sharov to write the main article. Ask him, too, who else he could suggest. Nikolai ought to write. And later on the factory manager ought to reply.

Budanov came next, his tall figure in marked contrast to Sharov's as he towered in the rostrum. Budanov spoke loudly and calmly without consulting his notes.

"Yuri Sharov need not have asked us older comrades not to take offence at his criticisms," he said. "The right to criticize is not the privilege of any particular age group. And if the young workers criticize the older ones and that criticism is just, then there's not the least reason for anyone to take offence. And Sharov's criticism of the factory management was, by and large, justified criticism."

Several young Communists applauded, but Budanov raised his hand.

"Hold it, comrades. You may not agree with what's coming. I accept as justified many of the factual examples Sharov cited but I don't agree with his conclusions and his generalizations. I disagree that innovations—the desire to break new ground and work with new methods—are a monopoly of youth. We have many old qualified engineers who studied according to what Sharov calls out-dated theories and yet are real innovators. Of course, I'm speaking about those who really keep in touch with life and don't get stale and complacent. . . ."

Budanov paused as if searching for words. From the platform the chief engineer gazed triumphantly at Sharov and the young engineers sitting near him.

"Yes, as I was saying, those who don't get stale and complacent, above all, about themselves," Budanov continued, and he too was looking at Sharov. "We don't want self-satisfaction about the fulfilment of plan; we want a restless determination to improve on today's performance. That ought to be the way for every leader to work, me in the first place."

The hall was stuffy. Someone opened the windows. From out of the darkness floated strains of a brass band playing in the park, girls' voices coming from far over the lake, gusts of laughter and muffled noises from the cinema where a new film was being shown. A short break in the meeting was announced; people went out on to the broad verandah of the club, smoked hurriedly—for the interval was brief—but managed to talk about the vital points that interested them all.

"The discussion's gone off the lines," grumbled Yuri Sharov. "I talked about silly coddling methods and the way I'm not given a chance to take the initiative. Nobody's answered that so far."

"You ought to have given concrete examples," said Lyuba. "Nobody will answer general charges. . . . Incidentally, Yuri, as a committee member you could have raised the question in the Comsomol long ago. Or you could have written to the *Tribuna* about it."

Lyuba glanced at Andrei who was standing a little way off, talking to Syurtukov. She could not hear what they were discussing but by the animated look on their faces she judged the subject to be interesting. She would like to have approached them but after a moment's hesitation left Yuri abruptly and walked in the opposite direction.

Since that incident on their drive to town, Lyuba had not once found herself alone with Andrei. Whether it was by accident or design she could not tell. She had been kept fully occupied with an inspection of the hostels and with drawing up the lists of entrants for the new term of night class.

True, this work meant meeting and talking to Andrei. She was always aware of his presence, she heard his voice, she saw the way his eyes lit up when she spoke to him. But there were always other people present; their meetings were of a strictly business character from start to finish.

Walking to the other end of the verandah, Lyuba kept Andrei in sight. She saw Dusya come up to him and laugh as she told him something. Dusya was dressed in a pretty frock. Vasya, too, looked pleased and proud. They were celebrating their baby son's second birthday and had invited Lyuba to the party. She wondered whether they had invited Andrei too. What had Dusya said to him that made him smile as happily as if he'd been given a present?

Lyuba made up her mind to go and ask Dusya who else was going to be at the party, but the interval ended and she had to hurry back to the platform.

She did not listen to what a young engineer from the designing office was saying. Her eyes, her thoughts were all on Andrei. He was jotting down what was being said, head bent over notebook. Lyuba saw only the top of his head with its glossy dark hair so neatly parted, his forehead and his broad shoulders with the well-fitting blue jacket over them.

Look at me, look at me, her thoughts spoke. Look at me immediately, she repeated like an incantation as she gazed at Andrei. And Andrei stopped writing and raised his head.

Their eyes crossed. Andrei dropped his left hand on to the window-sill. An invisible bond was stretched across the hall. Lyuba sat propping her chin on her hand, her cheeks aflame; she did not even hear the speaker blaming the Comsomol committee for neglecting the young engineers.

Smile at me, smile at me, Lyuba repeated to herself, and looked angrily at Andrei. Smile at me this very minute. . . . And Andrei smiled. Lyuba heaved a deep sigh of relief and only then did she become aware that the speaker was mentioning her by name.

"Comrade Zvonaryeva ought to look into all this."

Look into what? Lyuba tore her eyes away from Andrei; she pressed her palms against her burning cheeks. The young engineer was applauded when he left the rostrum. Obviously, he'd said something important. But could anything be more important than what was going on in her heart at this moment? Could anything mean so much?

The meeting continued. Various people took the floor and gave their views or made suggestions. But Lyuba remained oblivious to it all. She saw only Andrei, she thought of nothing else, she longed for the meeting to end so that she could leave the platform and join him.

Stoletov spoke. But Lyuba was aware of it only because towards the end of his speech Stoletov left the rostrum and stood before the table on the platform, blocking her view of Andrei. Pulling herself together, she heard Stoletov say something about the technical school and the growing need for teachers and the responsibility of the trained engineers for young workers who were studying.

"And in order to teach, one must learn oneself. Technique is always on the move and people can easily fail to notice that they're falling behind. Many forget that it's impossible to give the lead to growing, technically educated people unless they keep up with new technique themselves. Take Zvonaryeva, for instance. She's fine when it's a question of political or organizing work but I fear she's beginning to forget the things she learned in technical school. At any rate, she doesn't try to improve herself in that field. I know many cases of Comsomol secretaries

or members of Comsomol committees showing young people by their personal example that the way to higher technical education is open to all and that it's the duty of young people of today to take that way."

"Then see that we have a branch of the polytechnical institute at the factory," Lyuba said heatedly. "It's easy to talk about studying, but what facilities have we got for technical study?"

"You can do it by correspondence course," shouted Yuri Sharov. "Nobody's going to stop you doing that."

Stoletov however agreed with Lyuba that it would be useful to organize a branch of the polytechnical institute. Several factories had them; lecturers came and gave lectures and ran seminars. What's more, the factory had its people with high scientific degrees; they could take over some of the subjects. The chief engineer would certainly lecture on descriptive geometry. Kovalev could teach mechanics, at least to first-year students. And there were other specialists in the factory who could teach.

Stoletov wound up and returned to his place. Lyuba watched him and tried to avoid Andrei's eyes. She didn't like that bit about her being technically backward. But whose fault was that? She would certainly be studying if she had not been elected secretary of the Comsomol committee.

As she sat with head down, thinking things over, Lyuba failed to hear the motion being read with its amendments and corrections. Suddenly she felt worried and her thoughts grew muddled; she looked up and at once met Andrei's glance. He had moved from the window to the front row and was looking at her hard.

Don't worry, his eyes told her. Everything will be all right. I've been looking at you for such a long time. I'm sorry you look so upset.

That, at least, was what Lyuba read in Andrei's eyes, whatever he may really have been thinking about. She smiled faintly and pushed back a lock that had strayed on to her forehead. Not caring who might see their silent conversation, she returned Andrei's look, keeping her eyes on his even during the voting and trying to raise her arm just as he raised his. And when the meeting closed she simply flew to Andrei. And Andrei came to meet her.

2

The Syurtukovs gave such a splendid party to celebrate little Mitya's second birthday that practically the entire village had to be scoured for crockery, chairs and tables. Grandma Syurtukova first laid a table in the front room, as was right and proper, then she had to arrange for an overflow in the next room, and finally, ask for extra tables to be set up in the orchard behind the house.

Grandma Syurtukova grumbled and said there would not be enough to go round. Dusya might have told her how many she'd invited. So Dusya upped and went to the stores with a shopping bag. A good thing they were open so late. Vasya helped his father-in-law to carry chairs into the orchard and carefully brought out the crockery. An old woman from next door who had been helping Grandma Syurtukova in the kitchen lit the stove again—it looked a certainty that there'd be some more baking and frying to be done.

The guests began to arrive before everything was quite ready, and were made to help: an extension from the kitchen was rigged up in the orchard and a bulb hung from a bird-cherry tree; the girls laid the tables; the boys knocked together a bench out of two thick stumps and a plank. Meanwhile Grandma Syurtukova fumed and fumed—she thought she was going to receive her visitors with the ceremony that the occasion required but instead of that everything was topsy-turvy.

"You might at least have slipped out of the meeting and warned me that you and that daughter of ours had invited the whole factory," she said to her husband. "Making a disgrace of ourselves before everybody, that's what's going to come of it."

As it turned out, though, there was nothing for the Syurtukovs to be ashamed of. There was room for everybody, enough plates to go round and, what's more, plenty of food. And when everybody was seated and little Mitya placed next to his grandfather, Grandma Syurtukova at last calmed down. But then, casting her eyes round the company, she noticed Kovalev was not there and again started scolding Dusya inwardly for forgetting to invite the shop manager.

"Why didn't you ask Kovalev?" she whispered to her husband. "We know him; he's been here several times; and yet you leave him out."

"I didn't have anything to do with that, my dear," said Syurtukov. "The party's for the little boy and it's up to them to choose the guests. Now, when you and I are celebrating our anniversaries, it'll be different. We'll invite our own friends then."

All the guests were young. Valya, who was very near her time, had come. She kept looking at Mitya as if pondering whether she would have a son like that. The poor girl simply did not realize that Mitya was two years old, well past the difficult period, an independent being who could walk and didn't have to be carried in his mother's arms.

Lyuba was sitting next to Valya. Lyuba had brought Mitya a teddy-bear but Mitya did not like it; the bear was big and heavy and had green buttons where the eyes ought to be. Why on earth did they make such toys? She, Valya, could make a better bear than that herself. . . . On the other side of Lyuba sat the editor—so handsome with his dark hair.

Glasses were raised to Mitya's health; and then the guests forgot all about him. Mitya didn't in the least mind, of course; he enjoyed being among so many people and hearing the glasses ring and being allowed to hit his plate with a spoon. He didn't cry to be put in his cot, though it was long past bed time and only because it was his birthday was he being allowed to stay up so late.

The only one who took any notice of him was Valya. When everybody was busy talking, Valya changed her place and came closer to Mitya.

"What teeny-weeny hands the little pet's got," she cooed. "And such lovely thick hair."

Now another guest was looking at the baby—a quiet girl sitting a little apart from the rest. She had a morose expression on her face; there were brown blotches on her cheeks and forehead, and her eyes burned with a dull anger. Not even Mitya's little tricks softened her expression; indeed, the more the little imp played and the more Valya gushed over him, the grimmer the girl look

Who could she be? Valya felt quite worried. You shouldn't look at a baby that way, it might frighten the kid.

Valya felt like telling the girl off but just then she sprang to her feet. Then Valya saw that she too was pregnant.

"Where are you going, Antonina?" called Grandma Syurtukova. "Why, you've eaten nothing."

The girl ran indoors without a word. Just a flash of her dress on the porch and she was gone. Grandma Syurtukova shook her head disapprovingly and turned back to Mitya. Then Valya realized she must be the girl who had tried to drown herself. She worked in the foundry and Valya saw her very rarely about the factory.

It was not surprising that Valya failed to recognize the girl at once, for she had changed greatly: her face had become drawn and looked much older. That's what being friendly with Yasha did to you. Valya sighed and looked at her Vladimir. There he sat, ruddy-cheeked, gay, joking about something with young Nikolai Zhukov, his foreman. If she hadn't had her Vladimir, she might look no happier than that poor girl. . . . Vladimir caught her eye and smiled at her across the table.

"Feeling all right?" he asked. "Not too tired? I'll take you home if you like."

Valya shook her head. She didn't want to go home. She liked it here. Vladimir looked relieved and resumed his conversation with Nikolai.

But Valya slipped away from the table unnoticed and went indoors. She stepped carefully, afraid of stumbling, of doing something to harm "him." "He" was behaving very nicely now, thank you, he wasn't kicking as he had been doing lately.

Antonina was sitting in the dark. Her elbow rested on the windowsill and she was leaning out of the window.

Outside it was very quiet with only the rustle of the bushes in the hedge and the faint sound of a radio in the house opposite. The voices of the people in the yard were barely audible. There was an impression of great emptiness.

"Why did you leave?" asked Valya, walking slowly to the window across the room. "Why are you sitting here all alone?"

Without a word Antonina leaned farther out of the window, as if trying to escape Valya's attention. Valya came right up to her and sat down at her side. In the half-light she could just make out the other's thin sunken cheeks, the straight hair raised from the head with a comb and the faint sparkle of ear-rings.

"Why don't you drop in at the hostel?" asked Valya, settling down comfortably. "D'you know what we've got there now? Carpeting in all the corridors. Makes it ever so much quieter. And there's a new suite in the sitting-room too."

Antonina replied with a shrug of her shoulders, but before Valya had time to comment on her rudeness "he" gave her a kick. Or was it a thump of his fist? A little fist like Mitya's? "He" stirred and then settled down. Valya smiled and turned back to Antonina.

"Why are you so angry with everybody?" she reasoned. "You've only yourself to blame, you know."

The girl turned on her so violently that Valya raised her hands to defend her body. Noticing her gesture, Antonina said with a bitter laugh: "Fraid I'll hurt it, are you? And I'd cut mine out with a knife if I could,

Lying like a snake inside my belly. I've run myself up against the table; I've jumped out of the window, I've done everything I could but it hasn't done any good."

Valya listened to her with horror. Her arms remained folded over her body as if she feared that the girl was going to knife her. But Antonina turned back to the window and stared into the darkness. Someone went by whistling; she drew back and hid behind the curtain.

"Tonya," said Valya timidly, "why doesn't he marry you?"

"Marry me? He can't have two wives at the same time, can he? And he can't get a divorce. So there you are. But he wanted to marry me, too."

She leaned out of the window only to dodge back again as she heard footsteps passing the house. Like a hunted creature, thought Valya. Trying to make away with herself and now wanting the baby to die.

Valya thought of little Mitya. How could anyone think of killing a child like that? A little helpless tender child, a joy to all. . . .

"What made you go with a married man, Tonya?" Valya faltered. "You were breaking up another woman's life. . . ."

"I didn't know and I don't want to know," snapped Antonina. Her tone was so resentful that Valya felt at a loss. Tonya knew that Yasha did not need her, that she was disgraced and unwanted. That was why she had tried to kill herself—to escape from the shame and the grief.

"Listen, Tonya," said Valya firmly. "You oughtn't to be thinking only about yourself or about that awful Yasha. You ought to think about the baby. Don't forget it's got to be taken care of, the poor little fatherless mite. It's not to blame for anything."

Valya felt quite sentimental about this unborn child. Of course no father at all was better than having Yasha for a father, but all the same it was a bad business. The child would be an object of pity, it wouldn't be able to say "I'll tell my daddy" if somebody meant it harm; it would never know a father's caress, so sparingly given but all the more precious for that.

"Don't forget, Tonya, you've a debt to your child that's got to be paid. Instead of cursing it you'll have to earn its forgiveness. You oughtn't to be thinking of how to get rid of it but of how to give birth to a strong healthy baby. I'll hate you for the rest of my life if you do anything to hurt that baby. . . . Maria Borisovna gives lectures for young mothers," Valya went on. "I've been going to them. I'm going to bring up my baby according to all the latest scientific methods. All of us expectant mothers have promised that. No dummies, no swaddling-bands."

She launched forth on a detailed account of the baby-clothes and the number of dainty warm diapers that had to be ready for the baby when it arrived.

"Come to see me. I'll show you everything I've got, and help you to sew."

Valya's manner was full of good-will; she really wanted to help the girl. But Antonina's only response was to flash her burning eyes, spring to her feet and leave the room.

"You're nothing but a fool, Valya," she said from the door. "A hopeless fool."

She slammed the door behind her so hard that the window curtains fluttered. There was a crash in the next room. Antonina must have bumped against the table. Then her footsteps died away. The wicket-gate opened.

with a creak and a running figure flashed past the window. A minute or two afterwards the gate creaked again and Yelena Protasova hurried after Antonina.

Left alone in the dark room Valya was on the verge of tears, so hurt and confused did she feel. Why should Antonina have reproached her like that? She'd been such a quiet, polite girl before. How Yasha had spoiled her character! She'd copied his manners, his very words.

Valya drew near to the window. With a deep sigh she mastered her feelings. Antonina's rudeness meant nothing, after all. It was all the result of grief and unhappiness, the worst unhappiness that can befall a girl. Perhaps she had been wrong to mention the baby. Perhaps it would have been better to have blamed Yasha and opened Tonya's eyes to his faults. Why, the girl still thought Yasha loved her.

Could she, Valya, go on loving Vladimir if all of a sudden she found out he was carrying on with another woman? But then that situation could never arise. Her Vladimir was not capable of doing anything so vile. She was ashamed of the very idea.

A gust of cool wind stirred outside, fanning Valya's face. A cloud hung over the distant mountains. It crept up with a low muttering; pale flashes of lightning threw the line of the mountains into sharp relief. Yet the sky overhead remained clear and starlit. Only a faint scent of rain gave warning of the impending storm. Valya rose in alarm.

Here she was sitting and worrying while a thunderstorm was blowing up. She'd be caught in the rain.

She went out into the yard. The lamp in the tree threw a bright light on to the well-covered table, on to laughing faces. There had been much changing of places while Valya was away, and little Mitya was nowhere to be seen. He must have been put to sleep, for even the baby-chair had gone. Quite a choir had struck up at one end of the table. Dusya was singing the lead—something quiet like a lullaby for her baby.

Valya wanted to get Vladimir to take her home but he was sitting beside Nikolai and both of them were deep in conversation with Yuri Sharov about something. Vladimir, in fact, was so absorbed that he did not notice that Valya had returned. She did not like to interrupt, and, really, now she did not feel like leaving—the cloud couldn't be seen from the yard, the wind didn't reach there, only the very top of the tree rocked a bit. Maybe the storm would pass over. She would stay a little longer. Valya sat down not far from her husband's place.

She cut herself off from the conversation around her and let her thoughts drift. She thought about how she and Vladimir would get their flat in the new house and how all three of them would live there, she and Vladimir and their son. Every morning they would set off to work, leaving the baby in the factory crèche on their way. The crèche was new, a lovely place full of sunshine. The young expectant mothers had been taken over it recently. It was the verandahs that appealed most to Valya—sunny and broad, they could be heated in winter so that the babies could be left there all day.

In the evening she or Vladimir would bring the baby home. The trouble was they hadn't got a cot. There weren't any in the shop. There weren't any chests-of-drawers either, and a chest-of-drawers was something Valya wanted very much, instead of the sort of wardrobe they had

in the hostel dormitory, which wasn't deep enough to let you lay your clothes out properly.

Valya moved close to her husband, laid her head on his shoulder and went on dreaming. Vladimir did not turn away at once from the others but laid an arm over her shoulder; then he turned, smiled brightly at her and stood up.

"Why, you're falling asleep, Valya," he said. "Let's go. It's not good for you to sit there drowsing."

He gave Valya his arm and helped her to her feet. How she liked to be taken care of by him! They walked through the garden gate. Valya was surprised to find that the clouds now covered half the sky and were racing on to the accompaniment of flashes of lightning much brighter than those she had seen from the window.

"We'll manage it," said Vladimir with a glance at the sky. "No good running. You might stumble in the dark."

He took firm hold of Valya's arm and led her carefully over a little wooden bridge. Valya told him about Antonina. She felt really sorry for her now; she'd forgotten all about the rude way the girl had spoken to her. Vladimir, however, said he had no pity for Antonina: if a girl carries on with a no-good like Yasha, she deserves all that's coming to her.

"Yasha's a real pest," he said. "A faker, a disgrace to the whole shop. And your Antonina goes and falls for a type like that!"

"How could she know the sort he was?" said Valya. "She works in a different shop."

"I see, so she trusted a fellow she didn't know. You can smell the liquor on Yasha's breath a verst away. I suppose you'll tell me she didn't notice that. Why didn't she take the trouble to find out whether Yasha was married? I'm surprised to hear you defending her."

"I'm not defending her, I'm sorry for the girl."

"There's no need to be sorry for her," Vladimir sounded grave. "She's not a kid. It wasn't because he had a swagger pair of boots or sang to her that she went with him, was it? Or because he took her to the restaurant? And you're feeling sorry for her!"

Valya let him go on. Everything Vladimir said was true, of course. But the memory of Antonina's haunted expression, of the hatred on her face for her unborn child, and the thought of how the girl must have felt when she decided to drown herself—all that wrung pity out of her.

She said nothing of this to Vladimir; he saw things from another point of view, a man's point of view. Dusya also despised Yasha, yet she had taken Antonina into her house. Yelena Protasova knew as well as Vladimir the sort of fellow Yasha was, but that hadn't prevented her running after Antonina when she saw her leave the house. There were some things that only women could understand.

So it was with a sense of superiority over her husband that Valya listened to his reasoning. He was insensible to the maternal feelings of a woman. What he said was all quite true, but, all the same, something had to be done to help Antonina.

"Sure you're not too tired?" Vladimir said when they started to climb the hill. "Would you like to rest a little?"

And although Valya did not feel at all tired, just to please her husband she said faintly: "Yes, let's rest. Let's sit down for a minute or two on that bench."

Yasha was not seen again in the shop after that scrap with Nikolai. He gave notice that he wanted to work in the garage instead and Kovalev willingly let him go. The vacancy was filled by a beginner; Yasha was soon forgotten in the turnery.

Forgotten, that is, by all except Nikolai who, when helping the newcomer, used to sigh and think how useful Yasha's capable hands would be to the section just then. The turners were not finding it easy to learn to handle the new order and the younger ones had to struggle to fulfil their quotas. Indeed, but for Nazarenko and Yelena Protasova things might have been very bad. These two not only took on the most difficult work themselves but helped Nikolai in every possible way.

"Don't let Yasha's going worry you," Nazarenko told Nikolai. "Protasova is talking Uncle Vasya into coming back. He says he'll come if you ask him. They haven't started work in the new shop yet."

Nikolai did not at all like the idea of lowering himself before Uncle Vasya but everybody advised him to do so.

"Oh yes, you ought to ask him to come back—and ask him the right way too," said Dusya. "I bet he'll come. Specially now Yasha's gone. We can go along together if you like."

But Nikolai preferred to go alone; if he had to eat humble pie he'd do it without witnesses. For a whole day he worried about how to broach the subject, how and when to see the old worker. However, the talk turned out to be unexpectedly easy. When Nikolai, feeling embarrassed and uneasy, went up to Uncle Vasya, the man realized at once what was in the wind and smilingly asked him: "Come to call me back?"

Nikolai faltered something about realizing there had been a misunderstanding and that he was sorry, but the old turner interrupted him.

"Why all the explanation? Sorry, you say? I realize there are only youngsters left in the section. Anyhow, there's no work for me here yet. I'll come back to you tomorrow."

That evening Nikolai probably felt happier than at any time since he had come to the factory.

He went home in the best of spirits, dashed up the stairs—and suddenly stopped as if he had run up against someone's fist. Immediately ahead of him, on the landing, stood his father, his walking-stick raised to point at the enormous daisies painted on the wall. Nikolai had long ago grown accustomed to those out-size flowers and even found them quite pretty, but his father was apparently making fun of the local artist as he spoke in his loud voice to a young man who stood beside him with respectful attention.

Nikolai felt himself in the grip of strange, conflicting emotions. His immediate delight yielded in a flash to an unaccountable sense of embarrassment. He wanted to slip past unnoticed but at that moment his father turned and recognized him.

"Hello, Nik, here you are," he said, slipping his stick under his arm and laying his hands on Nikolai's shoulders. "Didn't I tell you we should meet in the Urals?"

He planted a hearty kiss on Nikolai's cheek and introduced him to his companion, whom he described as his assistant from the head office. "He graduated a year or two before you, by the way," he added. "Preferred to stay in Moscow. Not like you. He's full of ambition and is really quite gifted."

The young man whose name was Alexander Dmitrievich Chertkov was somewhat stiff in his manner towards Nikolai.

"You look a real production man," said Nikolai's father. "Overalls, a tool sticking out of your pocket and metal filings on your fingertips. Are you sure you're liking it here? Maybe the time's come to bring you back to Moscow?"

Nikolai shook his head firmly; his father patted him on the shoulder and said he would like to see Nikolai's room. As he went upstairs he told Nikolai that he had dropped in while on a business trip. He had a factory to visit in the neighbourhood but had something to attend to at Verkhnyaya Kamenka too.

He'd been very busy recently and hadn't been able to call on Nikolai's mother; so he couldn't give Nikolai any news of her.

As if he used to call on her often, thought Nikolai, carefully freeing his shoulder from his father's grasp. He had all the news of his mother without any help from that direction.

"Just a minute. I'll get the key," he said, going on ahead.

When the hostel warden handed Nikolai the key to his room, he told him that a visitor had been asking for him. He occupied the double-bedded corner room.

"If he's someone you know tell him I'm not a lackey but a civil servant," Sasha added resentfully. "Tried to tip me!"

Sasha's freckled face burned with indignation; Nikolai promised to speak to the visitor about the matter.

"He's my father, you see," he said, tapping the key lightly on Sasha's desk. "He's turned up on business."

Nikolai's voice had something unnatural about it. Sasha cast him a look of understanding. He knew those fathers!

"Don't worry," he said. "If he's here on business let him get off to the factory."

But Nikolai's father was in no hurry to go to the factory. He examined Nikolai's room, admired the view from the window but said he thought the factory management might at least have provided a qualified



engineer with a room to himself instead of making him double up with someone else. Nikolai listened to his father in silence. He did not offer Chertkov a chair and did not sit down himself; he remained standing near the door like a stranger in his own room.

For a brief moment a feeling of bitter resentment against his father such as he had not experienced since he was a little boy rose in Nikolai; but it subsided at once. Now he and his father were almost on equal terms: he, Nikolai, had become a self-supporting, independent man. Moreover, he had achieved this without the help of his father. There had been times when he had longed for some attention from his father but none had been forthcoming. Why, then, had his father turned up now with his offers of help, his suggestions of speaking to the director about getting Nikolai a separate room, or of having him moved to more interesting work?

"I could get a room for myself any day, if I wanted it. But I don't need one. As for my work I find it interesting and I'm not prepared to give it up for any other."

Nikolai spoke with unaccustomed firmness. There was no smile on his lips as he looked into his father's eyes. For a fraction of a second Zhukov senior lost his poise. His thick neck flushed deeply; he gave a short laugh and ran his handkerchief under his collar.

"A bit hot in here," he said placidly. "All right for skinny young fellows like you, but I can't stand it with my weight."

He quickly recovered from his embarrassment and invited Nikolai to join him at supper in the restaurant.

"I'll leave my work till tomorrow morning," he said. "It's not very important, anyhow. You lead the way; you're a local inhabitant."

But Nikolai declined the invitation to supper. He had something to do in the shop; people were waiting for him. He could show them to the restaurant, of course, although it was easy enough to find without his help—all they had to do was to walk to the end of the building and take the first street to the right.

Nikolai spoke tersely, drily; he returned his father's somewhat mocking glance boldly. Chertkov, silent and respectful, looked at Nikolai with some surprise—he had, apparently, expected a very different meeting between father and son.

Together they went downstairs; to keep the conversation from flagging, Nikolai's father said something superior about the paintings on the landings. Nikolai flared up and said that one had to know the Urals countryside before one could judge the merits of those paintings.

"I know a bit about it, son," his father said mildly. "I spent two years working here during the war."

Nikolai let this remark pass unheeded and ran swiftly down the last flight of stairs.

"You go that way. The restaurant's just round the corner," he said.

He nodded and hurried off towards the factory. He did not glance back; he did not want to see either his father or his companion again; he wanted to forget that they had come. Reaching the garden in the square before the factory gates, he suddenly realized that he was tired, and dropped on to the bench where he had not long before sat with Yasha.

He longed for Andrei's company. How much he would like to sit with him somewhere beside the lake. But Andrei had disappeared. Andrei

had been doing that often lately, coming home late and sitting down at once at the writing table. Nikolai had noticed how Andrei would take the lid off the ink-pot, place a clean sheet of paper in front of him, start writing something, cross it out and sit gazing out of the window.

Maybe Andrei was trying to write poetry and finding it difficult. Andrei was in love—that was abundantly clear to Nikolai, though Andrei hadn't said a word to him about it; and Nikolai, who felt hurt by his friend's secretiveness, had not asked him anything about it.

Nikolai went on wandering about aimlessly till he met Vladimir Nazarenko. Vladimir was running in a state of great excitement, his hair awry, his face pale.

"They've taken Valya to hospital," he babbled. "It's started."

He might have been referring to an earthquake. Nikolai could see the beads of perspiration on Nazarenko's broad face.

"They won't let anybody in," said Nazarenko, looking round distractedly. "Maria Borisovna turned me out and said I should call tomorrow morning. What am I going to do till then? Poor Valya was moaning like anything."

Vladimir took out a handkerchief and with trembling hands mopped his damp face. How unfair everything was! It was his fault that Valya was in pain, yet he was getting off scot free. How on earth could anyone expect him to go back to the hostel and sleep calmly while she was going through that ordeal?

"It's not an ordeal," said Nikolai with a superior air. "Every day thousands of women give birth and nothing happens to them. Tomorrow you'll be a proud father, that's all."

"Maybe I will and maybe I..." said Vladimir in a tragic whisper. He did not complete the phrase. "Let's walk past the hospital. Perhaps we'll be able to find out something."

The hospital stood in large grounds divided from the street by a green fence. They went in and stood underneath the windows of a part of the building where according to Vladimir the maternity ward was located. Valya had pointed out those windows to him long ago. Although it was late, the windows were open; the ward, however, was in darkness, only in two net-curtained windows a little farther along were there lights burning.

"That's the place," Vladimir whispered. "I wonder if I can hear her shrieks."

They stood immediately below the windows but heard nothing. Only the light footsteps of a white-gowned nurse hurrying through the garden to some out-building—the kitchen, probably.

"Let's sit on the grass," said Vladimir. "Over there."

They sat down on the damp bedewed grass. But almost immediately Vladimir sprang to his feet; wasn't that a moan he had heard inside?

"That wasn't a moan, it was a baby crying," said Nikolai. "D'you know, I used to think it was only in novels that husbands lost their senses when their wives were having a baby. It's true though. Pull yourself together or I'll go home."

Vladimir begged him not to leave. He promised to be patient and calm until it was all over. He sat down again and stretched himself out with his hands under his head.

"Think I'll take a little nap," he said with forced composure. "Let's see if we can sleep."

He shut his eyes and lay still for a few minutes. Nikolai watched the expression on his face and saw that Vladimir had no intention of sleeping and was listening to every sound. When someone walked rapidly on the other side of the fence, Vladimir's head shot up immediately. A woman in a grey dress entered the garden; she climbed the steps and went straight indoors.

"That's the doctor's assistant. They must have sent for her," whispered Vladimir. "Why should they do that so late at night?"

"She's probably on night-duty," said Nikolai, making his voice sound as calm as possible. "Why don't you sleep for a bit? I'll wake you up if necessary."

"Why don't you sleep yourself?" asked Vladimir suspiciously. "Stretch yourself out."

"I don't feel sleepy. I've got something to think of—my father turned up here today."

"Your father?" echoed Vladimir without the slightest interest. "Maybe she's not on night-duty at all. What if they sent for her specially?"

Nikolai felt annoyed with Vladimir for paying no attention to his news but a glance at his distracted face told him that he had better say nothing. Was it so important, after all? His father had come, his father would leave. Since Nikolai had come to work in the Urals he had completely forgotten his father's existence. It had been different in Moscow. There his father might drop in at the flat at any moment, to the distress of his mother who could not stand his visits. In Moscow his father always had the power to stir up childhood memories. When Nikolai was a little boy, his father had been a much-loved, necessary being, and when his father had left him, Nikolai had felt very bitter and lonely. His mother had never told him the grounds for the divorce but the boys and girls in the yard knew everything from their parents and lost no time in telling Nikolai that his father had found a new, young wife.

"He was carrying on with her before, too," the girl who lived at No. 7 told him, watching Nikolai's face inquisitively. "Everybody except your mother and you knew all about it. We all felt so sorry for you. . . . Every time you and your mother went away she used to hang around here. Such a nasty creature, too."

To Nikolai all that was like a stab in the back. He said nothing to his mother about it but he told Andrei.

"My old man's married again," he said casually. "I don't care. I can get on even better without him. . . ."

That was not true. His mother locked the room his father used to work in, but it seemed to Nikolai that his father was somehow hiding in there behind that door, and might come out any minute. When an old-age pensioner moved into the room, things became a little easier. They hung a rug over a connecting door and later on papered it over entirely; and with that all hopes of his father's return vanished and a new stage in his life began. True, life lacked something that it had before, but it was more real. . . .

"Don't you ever leave Valya and the baby," Nikolai said to Vladimir without looking at him.

"Me leave Valya? Are you mad?" Vladimir leapt to his feet. "You've no idea how I love her. What d'you take me for? Yasha?"

Vladimir listened intently to the night but everything was quiet around them. He squatted down on the grass. In the darkness his face looked pale; his grey eyes were dilated and seemed to have grown darker. He went on talking about his wife, telling Nikolai how he had met her, how they had fallen in love, how gentle and defenceless his Valya was.

Before he met Valya he never thought he could be strong and bold or necessary to anyone. She had revealed qualities in him, the existence of which he had never suspected. She told him he was handsome whereas he'd always considered himself an ugly, clumsy sort of fellow and had been too shy to go out with girls. After hearing him sing when they were on their own in the park once, she told him he had a wonderful ear for music and that he certainly ought to learn to play some instrument. Valya was afraid of going for walks in the forest and so Vladimir discovered that he was not only fearless but that he even wanted to run into some real danger so that he could defend her. She told him they were going to have a son and that it would be the best-looking and most intelligent child in the whole place.

"She's been angry with me occasionally the last few weeks," he said. "But she was right. I didn't do anything about getting a flat. Now we're taking a room in Yelena Protasova's house. I'm going to move our things there tomorrow—mine, Valya's and the stuff for the baby. Then, when she's fit to leave hospital, I'll take the two of them there. She doesn't know anything about it. She still thinks she's going to live in the hostel. It'll be a surprise for her...."

Nikolai listened with envy. Why was it always others who had such happiness in their lives, and not he? Maybe if he had told Nina how he loved her, that time in Moscow, she would have joined him here? Why hadn't he opened his heart to Nina? Surely not because he was too timid? Or was it because he wasn't sure that he was really in love with her?

Vladimir stretched out on the grass again and stared at the starlit sky. He was thinking tensely of something. The hospital grounds were dark and quiet. Then the light behind the curtained windows grew brighter, and white-gowned figures moved to and fro. They moved silently. Nikolai watched them without saying anything to his companion. What was happening in there? Nothing terrible, it seemed—the light burned so brightly and calmly in the windows.

Glancing out of the corner of his eye at Vladimir, Nikolai saw that he had fallen asleep. His eyes were shut, his chest rose and fell evenly, one hand involuntarily brushed away a blade of grass that was tickling his neck. Slipping off his jacket, Nikolai covered Vladimir with it and lay down beside him. He was just falling off to sleep himself when someone came out on to the porch and sat there smoking. Nikolai nudged Vladimir with his elbow.

"Look, there's someone over there in white. Let's go and ask about Valya."

Vladimir shot up and stared ahead with empty sleepy eyes. Then he sprang to his feet, tossing aside Nikolai's jacket and sprinted to the porch. Nikolai got up, brushed the dry grass off his shoulders and followed him.

"It's a girl, a girl," he heard Vladimir shout. "Everything's all right. Valya's sleeping."

He was dancing in front of a man little older than himself and shaking him warmly by the hand.

"Thank you, doctor, thank you. Oh, what a relief... Please tell Valya I'm terribly glad."

"Write her a note," the doctor said with a friendly laugh. "I'll put it beside her bed and she'll see it first thing in the morning."

Nikolai took out a notebook and pencil and Vladimir, leaning low over the paper, scribbled a few lines.

"Here you are," he said. "I've written the most important thing. Tomorrow I'll write her a long letter."

"And don't forget the flowers," said the doctor. "That's customary on such occasions, you know."

"Yes, I'll bring flowers too. Let's pick some, Nikolai Nikolayevich."

He longed to do something right away for Valya and for his little daughter, the two beings who were dearer and more necessary to him than anybody else in the world. To gather flowers, to move the things into the new room, to go shopping. Nikolai, however, restrained him.

"You ought to ask the gardener for some flowers," he said. "You can't give her a bunch of daisies. You need roses and carnations and some other nice-smelling flowers. We'll go to the trade union and to Lyuba Zvonaryeva and get them to give us a chit for the gardener. We'll move your things after work. The boys will give us a hand. What's the sense in disturbing Protasova at this hour of the night. She has to go to work in the morning."

Vladimir listened with a frown. All right, the things could wait till the evening. Nikolai could go home and sleep; he would stroll around a little longer. He preferred to be alone now.

He accompanied Nikolai to the Stalingrad and, assuring him that he was going home to bed, set off for the park. Nikolai, glancing back through the glass-panelled door, noticed the way he was going and smiled.

Happiness is catching. Nikolai dashed joyfully up the stairs, quite forgetting that his father was sleeping behind one of those doors. He decided to wake Andrei up and tell him how he and Vladimir had kept watch under the windows of the hospital.

But he did not have to wake Andrei up: Andrei was not asleep, he was sitting in the dark room at the open window, the table pushed back from him. At his side, with her head resting on his shoulder, sat Lyuba Zvonaryeva. Nikolai stopped dead at the door; he was afraid he had disturbed them; but neither of them noticed him. They were looking out of the window where a slender crescent moon hung in the sky, slipping in and out among the fast moving clouds.

"Looks like a boat," said Lyuba. Nikolai hardly recognized her voice, it was so soft and tender.

"Yes, I see," said Andrei. "Now it's coming out from behind that cloud again."

Andrei's voice had an unfamiliar note in it too, and Nikolai had an uncomfortable feeling of having intruded on others' secrets. He decided to leave the room but the floor board creaked and Andrei turned round.

"That you, Nik?" he asked in a loud voice. "Where've you been all this time? Come in and tell us."

Chapter Twelve

1

"The question is not quite as simple as you seem to think, Stepan Demyanovich. I know there are many who like Kovalev's machine but . . . but there are a number of circumstances which the head office has no right to disregard."

Nikolai Mikhailovich Zhukov sat in a deep arm-chair near the window.

At a distance from him, sitting up against the wall, Chertkov had found himself a modest place; on his knees he held a bulky brief-case with two clasps. Stoletov paced the room, his hands folded behind his back.

Ten had struck before Zhukov reached the factory. Stoletov had already been round the shops, had visited with Koryakov the site of the new apartment house and found out how things were going there, and had taken Lyuba Zvonaryeva to task for not organizing a competition between the building workers and the Comsomol members of the machine shop. In short, Stoletov was well into his working day when Zhukov had wished him a good morning and told him he was ready to begin.

It was clear that Zhukov had spent a good night, had breakfasted well, was in an excellent mood and found the world to his liking.

"It's about those circumstances that I wanted to have a word with you alone," Zhukov continued, his eyes following Stoletov. "They are not altogether in Kovalev's favour and that's something he must reckon with."

"But, if I'm not mistaken, you yourself recommended the Kovalev machine, Nikolai Mikhailovich," said Stoletov. He sat down next to Zhukov. "I remember a document that referred to its excellent qualities. That's why I wrote to you in the first place. . . ."

"Oh, I'm not denying that it has excellent qualities, undoubtedly it has," Zhukov said with animation. "But time passes, and new pieces of machinery that are improvements on the old appear and the others have to make way for them. That's exactly what happened in the case of Kovalev's invention."

He went on to tell Stoletov about the machine that had superseded Kovalev's: it was a product of the designing bureau at head office; a large group of gifted men and women had worked on it; it had been provisionally named the Kurzhen; an experimental model had been made and had yielded thoroughly satisfactory results in operation. This machine would probably be included in the ministry's production plan and the factory would have to make its arrangements to produce it on a large scale.

"I think, Stepan Demyanovich, that you ought to find the Kurzhen more to your liking than Kovalev's 'shrew,'" Zhukov said with a smile. "The designer has preserved all the principles of excavation work—there's been no compromise there. But he's introduced the rotary principle as well—several scoops work at once and deposit their loads on to a conveyor belt."

He glanced at Chertkov who unlocked the brief-case and whisked out a leather-bound prospectus which he handed to Stoletov; then he took up his place beside him, ready to offer explanations.

The first page showed a general view of the machine. It resembled a river dredger in that it had scoops which were attached to a moving belt that carried them up; but instead of the usual barge for the dredged sand there was a conveyor belt very much like the one on the "shrew." The scoops moved in a ring, each one sweeping up its load from the bottom of the excavation pit.

"Interesting," said Stoletov as he turned over the pages. "Nothing original about the design, of course, but it's applied in a new way."

He examined the various details of the machine and made a note of the fact that the prospectus had been machine-printed though in a small edition, one hundred copies in all.

"The design has been patented and a certificate issued," said Zhukov, noticing the other's interest in the notes at the back of the prospectus. "The designer's interests will not suffer as a result of it going into mass production."

"What was the idea of having this printed?"

"To popularize a useful machine and stimulate this discussion," said Zhukov, smiling. "The design was discussed on many occasions—both at special meetings at the head office and at scientific-technical conferences. The question of putting something into mass production is not one to be decided lightly."

Stoletov did not like Zhukov's slightly pedantic manner of speech. There was something irritating about this leading official from head office who sat there talking in this superior way to his subordinates in the provinces. But his resentment was short lived: after all the head office must know much more about every new technical improvement.

"It's hard to form an opinion from the drawings," he said as he returned the prospectus to Chertkov. "I think, though, that there's room for both types of machine. Moreover, I find Kovalev's machine more interesting because it solves the problem of shifting earth on new principles whereas this machine of yours sticks to the old principle of the scoop, merely increasing the number and unloading on to a conveyor belt."

"But it does away with the need for lorries."

"That problem can be solved a different way—by lengthening the jib of the excavator," said Stoletov. "There's nothing at all new about an excavator that works with an arm long enough to unload the excavated earth on to the required spot without the use of lorries."

"By the way, what about that other excavator your previous group was working on?" asked Zhukov. "A great pity you had to drop such interesting work. From what I hear though, you're still giving your comrades a hand."

Zhukov, it seemed, was excellently informed about what was going on in the excavator works. He had visited the place not long before, had seen the design for the jib that Stoletov had sent and knew which of Stoletov's suggestions his comrades had found useful. He spoke about these matters with enthusiasm and turned the conversation away from the Kovalev machine without Stoletov being aware of it.

Stoletov found it interesting to talk about the excavator works, about which Zhukov knew so much. He learned that in the current year the works had received much new equipment, that several shops had been extended and that there were plans to open a branch of a scientific research institute there.

"I expect you think about your old job from time to time, don't you? It's always hard to break with a place you've grown used to. . . ." Zhukov sighed in sympathy with Stoletov, adding at once that the Verkhnyaya Kamenka factory had a great future too. "My youngster's working here. Still only a boy. Doesn't seem so long since he was running about with a Young Pioneer scarf round his neck, and now he's an engineer and looks a real production man."

He stopped as if expecting Stoletov to say something about Nikolai; but Stoletov did not react and Zhukov changed the subject and began talking about how he had worked in the Urals during the war and how delighted he was to find so much industrial development there since the war.

"I can't recognize it," he said. "I remember places where there used to be only a few barrack-like buildings—why, there are whole towns there now! The scale's something tremendous. Have you seen the House of Culture at Tagil? You haven't? Take my advice and go and have a look at it. It's simply grand."

While Zhukov went on talking, Stoletov sat wondering what could have brought the man to Verkhnyaya Kamenka. Was it to inform them that head office had decided to give the *coup de grâce* to the Kovalev machine? That did not require a personal visit, a letter would have done. Or was it to see his son? That was another matter; it was clear though that Zhukov had not yet had a heart-to-heart talk with Nikolai, for, if he had, he would certainly have raised the subject of the difficulties Nikolai was now surmounting.

Lost in his reflections, Stoletov stopped listening to what Zhukov was saying; then he noticed that Zhukov was waiting for an answer. He was about to ask him to repeat his question when Andrei poked his head through the window. He was waving a fresh copy of the regional Comsol-mol paper.

"Seen the paper, Stepan Demyanovich?" he asked. "What d'you think of that article? They've printed a picture too. Dusia Syurtukova and the lads in the foundry."

Andrei did not notice Zhukov sitting close to the window. Zhukov looked up and waved a friendly hand.

"Hello, Comrade Editor, don't recognize your old friends, eh? I read that article of yours. Good work."

"Why, it's you, Nikolai Mikhailovich. I didn't know you were here. What a surprise. Very glad to see you."

So Zhukov had not seen his son, thought Stoletov. He couldn't have done, for Andrei and Nikolai shared a room.

"You shouldn't have gone for Nik the way you did in the paper," said Zhukov as he shook Andrei's hand. "I remember what you wrote: 'Foreman Zhukov is not taking the initiative.' Is that the way one comrade should write about another? I didn't expect it of you. You've been such friends for so long—and then, all of a sudden, I see that in the paper."

"But Nikolai didn't mind," said Andrei. "We went over the article together before it was printed."

"Same old 'unity of opposites,' as your father used to say about you two, eh?" said Zhukov with a smile. "What would you say if your work was criticized?"

"I'll accept criticism from friends just as from strangers, if I've deserved it," said Andrei. "Please come to my office, look through the file and point out my mistakes. As a matter of fact, I send my old man a copy of every issue. Doesn't he show you them?"

Andrei looked at Zhukov enquiringly but Zhukov avoided a straight answer.

Stoletov found this polite, debonair engineer less and less to his liking. In fact, he didn't like him at all.

"Perhaps we should ask Comrade Kovalev to join us," he said, laying down the newspaper. "Or shall we go and see him in the shop?"

Stoletov wanted to get the talk about the "shrew" over as soon as possible. Zhukov, apparently, was of the same opinion. He asked Stoletov to send for Kovalev.

"That would really suit me better, if you don't mind," he said. "I've only a limited amount of time at my disposal; I want to see my son before leaving."

While Stoletov was on the phone, Zhukov made plans with Andrei about meeting him later.

"Let's have dinner together," he suggested. "The restaurant isn't at all bad. Why don't both of you come? I didn't make any plans with Nikolai last night about what we should do today. You went off to work too early for me this morning, I'm afraid."

Andrei left after promising to arrange things with Nikolai. As he went out of the room he ran into Kovalev. Zhukov smiled, walked across the room to meet Kovalev, grasped both his hands and shook them vigorously.

Kovalev looked cold and mistrustful. With reserve he wished Zhukov good morning, nodded to Chertkov and sat down waiting for someone to open the conversation. Zhukov asked for the prospectus again and began to turn over the pages in front of Kovalev. He spoke considerately of the good points of Kovalev's "shrew," not forgetting to mention that he had once championed it, and once more listed the reasons why the machine had not been put into production.

"My advice to you now, Arseni Mikhailovich, is not to press for its production. It would be a pure waste of time, energy and nerves. Wait for a more suitable occasion. I hope that won't be too far off."

"I know all about this," said Kovalev, putting the prospectus aside. "The machine the head office intends to put into production isn't as good as mine. I can say that without boasting. Its chief merit is that it originated from head office and its leading workers. If you've come all the way from Moscow to Verkhnyaya Kamenka to tell me what you've just said, you've wasted your time."

Stoletov took no part in the conversation, but watched the two men attentively. Everything Kovalev said seemed right to him, all Zhukov's arguments flimsy and evasive. He could not exactly explain why he had these impressions. He simply did not like the whole "shrew" affair; in his subconscious lurked the idea that there was something fishy about it all.

No, he was not going to give up. Stoletov eyed Zhukov grimly. True, Zhukov was an expert, backed by the head office, a scientific research institute and other organizations. Well, he wasn't a broken reed himself; he knew where to turn for help...

However, he did not betray his intentions to the others; he remained silent even when Kovalev, who had said all he wanted to, rose to his feet.

"It's a long time since I took any interest in getting that machine produced," Kovalev said. "You know that. I haven't been pestering you with letters and statements—you know that too. This meeting did not take place on my initiative. There's nothing for us to talk about. With your permission, I'll go back to the shop, to my work."

He left the office without even a glance at the prospectus.

"You see how things are," said Zhukov with a shrug. "You can't talk to him: he won't listen to reason, he's always looking for undercurrents and hidden snags."

Zhukov sounded irritated. He flung the prospectus at the silent Chertkov. Chertkov flipped open the clasps of the brief-case and slipped the prospectus in.

"But I hope *you* don't think there's any funny business going on, Stepan Demyanovich," Zhukov went on. "I'd be very upset if you did."

For all his outward calm, Zhukov was puzzled and slightly at a loss. He had clearly not expected such frank speaking. Perhaps he'd counted on finding a tamer, quieter Kovalev; perhaps he thought Stoletov had written to him on a momentary impulse and that the question of the Kovalev machine would simply not arise again.

Sensing the other's mood, Stoletov changed the subject by proposing to Zhukov a visit to the factory or to the site of the new block of flats. Zhukov said he would like to see both; Stoletov asked a man from the technical information department to show the visitor everything he wanted to see.

Zhukov took his leave with forced cordiality.

"Don't fail to give me a ring when you're next in Moscow," he said. "My wife and I would be delighted to see you..."

Once out of the office Zhukov's face changed; the genial, animated look faded and it was with a bored expression that he walked across the factory yard, oblivious to the explanations of his young guide. Glancing into the foundry, he thought of his glossy shoes and decided not to go in.

"You knock off for dinner at noon, don't you?" he asked. "It's three minutes to, and I have an appointment with my son. Where's the first machine shop. Let's go there."

Nikolai was not in the shop. A middle-aged woman in blue overalls looked up from her lathe and said the foreman had gone to town and wouldn't be back before the evening shift.

"To town?" echoed Zhukov. "What's he gone there for?"

"He got permission from the shop manager to go on private business," the woman replied. "Gone to buy a cot. We've had an event in our section. A baby."

"A baby? Nikolai! Impossible!"

"No, not him," said the woman with a smile. "Our foreman's not married yet. The wife of one of our turners has a baby daughter and we decided to give her a present. Nikolai Nikolayevich has gone to buy it."

Zhukov looked round the turnery. He saw that, with the exception of this woman, everyone was young—younger, perhaps, than Nikolai himself. He sat down at Nikolai's desk and scribbled a brief note.

"Very sorry we didn't meet again after all. Just off. My greetings. If you need any help, don't forget you have a father."

Chertkov and the young man from the technical information department waited for him while he wrote.

"Ready," said Zhukov, tucking the note under a spanner. "Let's be off."

Zhukov did not visit any more of the factory and he turned down the invitation to look over the housing estate. He went back to the Stalin-grad, pulled a chair up to the window of his room and sat in silence, his eyes on the road along which the car that was being sent for him from the town would come. Chertkov tried to start a conversation, but Zhukov silenced him with an irritated gesture and suggested he should take a walk and have a look round the new buildings.

"You'll find it useful," he added caustically. "At your age it's essential to get to know new places. Who knows, you may have to come and work at a factory like this!"

Silent and obedient Chertkov left the room; a few moments later Zhukov saw him down in the street below, looking about him.

"Take a good look, my lad," Zhukov muttered. "We'll send you out of Moscow to a factory and see how you'll get on there."

Zhukov had an inexplicable and unpleasant feeling of having lost something he valued. It was only quite recently that Nikolai had been a little boy. He could see the little fellow with his round close-cropped head, dressed in his white shirt with a Young Pioneer's red silk scarf, rushing to meet his father across the yard, abandoning his game of football—the best loved game of all. He would rush to his father, his arms wide apart, ready to hug him tight as he looked up with eyes brimming with love and devotion.

And now his son was a qualified engineer. Grown up. A decent young fellow, apparently. His eyes were still clear and candid, but now they looked at him as if he were a stranger. Now his son avoided meeting him, wouldn't talk to him, wanted to have nothing to do with his father. That was confoundingly unpleasant. Unfair too.

It wasn't as if he'd not fulfilled his parental obligations. He'd sent money, hadn't he? But that crazy woman had returned it. He'd arranged for his son to have a holiday by the sea, tried to help him when he went to college and then when he got his first job. He'd done everything, but his helping hand had always been refused.

It was Maria's fault, thought Zhukov, picturing to himself the face of his first wife. It was she who had robbed him of the love and trust of his son. She had taken her revenge on him. But now she, too, was left alone. Her son had gone; he had his own life, his own work now, and both his father and mother were forgotten.

Just then he remembered the white stone ink-stand and the note he had seen propped up against it: "Mother. Thank you for my degree. Your son."

No, she had not been forgotten. Her photograph hung on the wall of Nikolai's room in this very building and, of course, he wrote to her about everything he did. . . .

The car had not arrived; Zhukov had had enough of sitting by himself at the window. He glanced down into the street and saw Chertkov meekly

strolling in the garden of the factory square. Zhukov waved to him and Chertkov hurried back. Panting and respectful, he stood in the door.

"Let's go to the Green Mountain," said Zhukov. "But please tell that independent young man who behaves as if he's in charge of a Moscow hotel that if our car comes it's to wait for us."

At the Green Mountain he ordered a copious luncheon, drank a glass of old brandy and with it recovered his self-confidence. He mentioned to Chertkov in passing that his relations with his son had been strained for many years and expressed the hope that Chertkov was on better terms with his father.

"My father's dead," said Chertkov. "I treasure his memory."

"That's what I like to hear," said Zhukov. "Look, isn't that our car coming?"

2

The maternity ward in the factory hospital was known as the "main ward." Its beds were the most comfortable, its curtains by far the prettiest. It was the first ward the doctors visited on their morning rounds; here the most interesting conversations took place.

Valya Nazarenko's ward-mates were Antonina and a Heroine Mother who was having her tenth baby. Antonina lay all the time with her face to the wall, pretending to be asleep. She talked as little as possible. Her bed stood apart from the other two, near the door. The top of her bedside locker was bare except for some bottles of medicine.

Valya's locker could not hold all the flowers she was sent and they often overflowed on to the window-sill. Every morning, on his way to work, Vladimir stole up to the window and slipped a fresh bunch of flowers through it. He borrowed vases from all his friends in the hostel and brought the flowers in them, complete with water. Every evening another bunch appeared on the window-sill.

But not only Vladimir brought flowers; they came from Valya's girl friends, from the girls in the print-shop, from Yelena Protasova. Valya wanted to share them with Antonina who never had any visitors, and she asked the nurse to place a bunch on the locker beside her bed, but Antonina, as if by accident, knocked the vase to the floor with her elbow. It broke, and the flowers scattered.

"People are right not to bring you any flowers," said the nurse as she swept up the broken glass. "The other patients manage to keep ever so many bunches in order and you can't even manage to look after one."

"I don't need the ugly things," snapped Antonina. "Don't put any more of them near me."

Valya felt deeply hurt that her present had been called ugly. It was a lovely bunch—asters and dahlias and beautiful decorative grasses. It was not one of the bunches that Vladimir had brought her—she never gave those away. Polina had brought it from the girls in the print-shop. And with the flowers she brought her own present, a bottle of May Day eau-de-Cologne.

Visitors were not admitted to the ward but everyone came to the window. That was where Polina came with the flowers. She looked smart and was wearing a new pair of ear-rings. She congratulated Valya, conveyed the greetings of the two girls as well as of Poperechny and the printer,

and said she had a present for little Ksenia too, but that it would have to wait until the baby had left hospital.

"I've made her a pink lace frock. There's very pretty lace material in the shop and I bought some to make a blouse for myself but there was some left over so I managed to make a little frock."

"What does she want lace for?" asked Valya. "She's still in diapers."

"She'll wear it when she's grown a little. I got the pattern from my sister—her girl'll soon be a year old."

As she chattered on, Polina looked round the ward with interest. The Heroine Mother was lying on her back, knitting something with clicking needles; Antonina, as usual, was pretending to be asleep, with the sheet drawn right up to her face. Polina's sharp eyes at once noticed that Antonina's locker was bare, and she asked Valya in a whisper whether Yasha ever came to see Antonina.

Valya shook her head; then Polina whispered that Yasha had a new flame, a girl from the stone-cutting works across the lake.

"He doesn't give Tonya a thought, the wretch," Polina went on, her ear-rings shaking. "He's fooled so many girls, and given his wife hell, but the world's full of numbskulls. I've no sympathy for them."

Antonina buried her head still deeper in her pillow and drew the sheet up till it concealed her completely. Valya noticed this and cast Polina a warning glance, but Polina was already off on a new subject—newspaper shop-talk.

"Things are in an awful state without you," she said. "There's no one to type and all the copy comes to me in manuscript. Nobody writes worse than Andrei Borisovich, unless it's Vanya. You lose patience, trying to make out the words: Vanya's having a shot at typing himself but he's terribly slow."

"He'd better look out he doesn't bust the typewriter," said Valya uneasily. "Keep an eye on it, Polina; it'll be awful if anything went wrong with that lovely typewriter."

"It can be repaired, can't it," intervened the Heroine Mother. "That's easily done. You shouldn't let little things like that worry you."

The Heroine Mother was a buxom woman in her late thirties, with a calm, gentle face. For her the arrival of yet another baby was no great event, but she was the soul of kindness to the young mothers, giving them advice about what they ought to do for the sake of their own health and so that their babies should grow up strong. She maintained that the main thing was to keep calm: if a mother didn't worry, if she slept at the right times and ate properly, her baby wouldn't fret and would eat and sleep properly too. And what more did a child in arms want than that?

"Hygiene," said Valya timidly. "Clean nappies, baths, fresh air."

"That goes without saying; you heard all that at the consultations. But the baby's character depends on the way you behave more than on anything else."

"Our Valya's got a kind, calm nature," said Polina. "If little Ksenia inherits her nature she'll grow up into a really nice girl."

"That all depends on the way she's brought up," said the Heroine Mother, her needles clicking. "What's inheritance got to do with it?"

Polina, who never liked anyone to oppose her opinions, hastily got ready to leave.

"I'm going to the pictures," she said. "There's a new picture, a Hungarian one. They say there's an actor with a lovely voice in it."

Promising to drop in again, she threw Valya a kiss, nodded to the Heroine Mother and left. Before going, though, she assured Valya that she considered herself Ksenia's god-mother: although they did not go in for christening babies these days, it was still nice to have a god-mother.

The Heroine Mother went on knitting the blue woollen yarn—she was making a jumper for her eldest daughter, a girl already of school-leaving age. The big ball of wool lay beside her in a box to prevent it rolling off the bed. On the bedside locker stood a jar of cranberry juice, the top covered with a piece of gauze, a pot of home-made clotted cream, and a fuchsia plant in full flower. All these had been brought by her husband and elder children.

The fuchsia was hung with large deep-red flowers. The nurses watered it every day and gushed over its beauty.

Life ran on smoothly in the ward. The main event of the day was feeding the babies. The nurse would carry all three in together and each time Valya had the awful feeling that the nurse was going to drop her Ksenia or bump her head against the door. Ksenia, of course, was the prettiest of the three, so tender and fair. The Heroine Mother's baby—a boy—was too big and he cried in a bass voice. As for Antonina's little boy, he was quite dark and ugly, like a raven, thin, shrieking all the time, with a long blue beak of a nose.

Valya, naturally, did not mention this to Antonina but she obviously realized it for herself, for as soon as the baby was given to her she would turn her back on the ward, lay the infant up against the wall and feed him in silence. She always finished before the others and, when the nurse came in answer to her ringing, would say: "He's had enough. You can take him."

Valya fed Ksenia longer than any. She kept looking at her, moving the wrappings from her little head to see how the hair was growing, kissing her cheeks and taking delight in every movement of the tiny hands. She would whisper quietly to her daughter and tell her how they would go home and be met by Daddy, what lovely little frocks and bed-clothes were waiting for her. Ksenia would go on sucking and listening and then fall asleep, and then the nurse would take her back into the infants' ward.

Really, apart from the baby-feeding and the visitors coming to the window, nothing else happened in the maternity ward. But the days did not drag and the time when all three mothers would leave the hospital drew near.

The first to leave was the Heroine Mother. She was met outside the hospital by her husband and all their nine children. The children stood in a bunch under the window, squabbling about who was going to carry the baby. They had brought with them a blue flannel blanket and a pretty sheet with embroidered corners—the eldest girl had made it while her mother was in hospital.

By sitting right up, Valya could see through the window. The Heroine Mother came down the steps, the father carried the baby, the mother kept a careful hold on the potted fuchsia, and around her thronged the children. It was hard to tell whether they were supporting her or whether they were all hanging on to her.

How nice it would be if she and Vladimir had lots of children. Then she would get a Heroine Mother's medal and she'd have a brood of children round her.

The Heroine Mother was accompanied to the garden gate by Maria Borisovna and two nurses. It was a proper ceremony and Valya felt a twinge of envy when she thought that she and Vladimir would walk away from the place on their own. Well, not quite on their own—there'd be Ksenia.

But a day before Valya's turn came, Antonina was due to leave the hospital. Valya wondered who would be there to meet the girl, to bring the layette and help the mother and child home. Surely she wouldn't be quite alone with her "little raven" wrapped in a grey hospital blanket. Tears came to Valya's eyes at the very thought but she could not make up her mind to mention the matter to Antonina—she'd had so many rebuffs when she had tried to express sympathy.

Antonina slept badly on the night before she was due to leave. She tossed and turned, got up frequently and spent long spells at the window. The night was very dark. The trees in the garden rustled faintly, thunder rumbled in the distance and barely perceptible flashes of lightning illuminated for brief moments the crests of the mountains. Antonina sat beside the window lost in her thoughts. She did not notice that Valya had awakened and was looking at her in alarm.

The minutes dragged on; Valya could not contain herself.

"Tonya," she said in a low voice. "What are you sitting there for?"

The girl shrugged vexedly, slid down from the window-sill and went back to bed. She rolled up in a ball as if she wanted to make herself invisible, but in the faint light that penetrated the ward from the passage, Valya saw that she was sobbing silently. Her shoulders were heaving, she held the blanket pressed to her lips and made no attempt to brush away her tears.

Valya was now so frightened that she got up and crossed the ward to Antonina's bed. She sat down on a stool: she was afraid to sit on the bed in case Antonina should push her off. How could she tell how the girl would take her sympathy? But this time Antonina did not rebuff Valya; she sat up and began to whisper through her choking sobs.

"D'you think I don't blame myself for what I've done?" she began haltingly. "Every minute since he was born I've been blaming myself. Why, why did I do it? Why did I spoil my baby's life as well as my own? He's not to blame for anything. Perhaps he didn't even want to be born. What sort of life is he going to have? All the other children have got fathers, only he hasn't. . . . Tomorrow I've got to leave this place and who's going to come to meet me? If Mother had been alive she'd have forgiven me, she'd have come; but she's dead and I've only got a stepmother and I can't expect any pity from her."

Now Valya's tears were flowing too. She had forgotten that crying might be bad for the baby, that Antonina had been rude to her, had even struck her. Valya had but one thought in her mind—that Antonina and her "little raven" were quite alone in the world, that they needed help and that something would have to be done for both of them.

What a rotten lot those core-makers were, thought Valya. Not one girl had come to see Antonina. What little prigs they were. Turning up their noses at their friend just because she had a baby without getting married.

Valya stopped crying; her grief for Antonina's plight was replaced by anger with the core-makers. She was thinking how Antonina could be helped. First thing in the morning she must tell Vladimir that Antonina was due to leave hospital—there would be plenty of time because she would not be leaving until afternoon. Vladimir would have to arrange something. He could think what ought to be done and ask the boys about it. . . . Still better, he could explain the whole situation to Dusya Syurtukova: Dusya felt sorry for Antonina, had even brought her home to live with her, but Antonina had run off in her pride. Now she had lost some of that pride, though: she had to think of her son as well as of herself. . . . Valya would have to be careful not to oversleep and miss Vladimir when he brought her flowers the next morning.

"Don't cry, Tonya," she whispered. "Don't cry. What's a father, after all? Far better there isn't one at all than a fellow like Yasha. Why, Yasha's got a growing son as it is, but d'you think he ever gives a thought to him? Yasha's wife's the most miserable woman in the place. But you're independent. You can work to support yourself and your son. You're young, you can study and get a good qualification. You can go to the technical school in the autumn. After that you'll be a foreman. You'll leave Yasha far behind and won't even look at him."

"But I love him, Valya," sobbed Antonina. "I love him, although I know he's forgotten all about me. Could you forget someone you loved? Except for him I've never kissed a boy in my life, I never let anybody even hold my hand. . . . I never thought he'd drop me like that after—after getting what he wanted from me. . . ."

Antonina sat up in bed, the very image of her baby with her thin body and her dark face and big tearful eyes. Hastily she told Valya the whole story of her love affair with Yasha. It was as if a dam had broken; the words came flowing out by themselves. It had been a brief affair, with little to be remembered: Yasha had noticed her at a party and invited her for a dance, then they'd gone into town once or twice and been to the cinema together. They sat with their arms round each other in the back row. Yasha kissed her and called her his "little swallow." Nobody had called her that before—she knew she hadn't much in the way of looks.

"Then he started coming to see me in the hostel when the other girls were out. Nobody knew about it; I kept it a secret. I was afraid of what people might say. You see, he'd promised to marry me after he'd got his divorce. Then he stopped coming, didn't even say a word to me when we met. That's all his love amounted to. But I'm—I'm still in love with him."

Valya listened with astonishment. Could anyone love Yasha like that? It seemed impossible.

"You'll fall out of love with him all right, Tonya," she said firmly. "You'll have your son to love instead. What are you going to call him?"

"Igor," whispered Antonina. "I've a young brother called Igor. I'll call him after my brother."

"What about the surname?"

"Mine, of course. Why should he bear his father's name if he refuses to recognize him—or me, for that matter?"

They quietly discussed future plans: little Igor would be put in the crèche, Antonina would go back to work and in the evenings she would

study at the technical school. It was a pity that there was only one technical school in the place—for machine-builders. Antonina would rather have studied medicine so as to become a hospital nurse.

They became so engrossed in the subject that they let their voices rise; the night-nurse peeped into the ward.

"What's going on in here?" she enquired. "Why aren't you in bed, Nazarenko? Go to sleep at once. We can't have the regime upset like this."

The night-nurse waited until Valya had returned to her bed. Then she shut the door, only to reappear a few moments later.

"Whispering again? Stop it at once or I'll report you to Maria Borisovna tomorrow."

Again she left them, though this time she did not close the door. Valya and Antonina lay quiet, each thinking her own thoughts. Antonina was thinking that she might still make something of her life, that the baby might go to the crèche as a weekly boarder so that she could work and study. Then, if all went well, she would get a room of her own. Families were being moved out of the hostels into new houses and now she had a family. She would get her young brother to come from the village and put him in the trade school; then he would get a job in the factory. They'd make a family as good as any. Perhaps Yasha would then take some notice of his little Igor....

No, Yasha would not do that. He wouldn't take any notice of her either, or call her his little swallow again. What was the good of hoping, of dreaming of things that could never be? What she had to do was to think out her own life, to think for herself, for her son and for the husband who did not and was not going to exist. Her brow furrowed, her chin resting on her hand, Antonina thought and thought until sleep overcame her....

Next morning, when Antonina was called to the surgery for a last check-up before leaving, she had made up her mind.

"Maria Borisovna, could you help me to get work as a nurse in the crèche?" she enquired. "I heard from the nurses that they're short of staff. I wouldn't mind what they gave me."

"Why do you want to work there, Tonya?" asked Maria Borisovna with a searching look at Antonina. "It's hard work and the pay isn't particularly good compared to what you can earn in the factory with your qualifications."

How could she explain to Maria Borisovna that she didn't want to go back to the shop where the girls knew all about Yasha? How could she tell her that she did not want to be separated from little Igor—she wouldn't be allowed to keep him in the hostel at his age; he'd have to be boarded out. But how could she tell a stranger these most intimate and treasured thoughts?

But Maria Borisovna asked no more questions. She sat pondering, one hand making aimless marks with a pencil on a sheet of paper. She did not have to hear Antonina's story from the girl's own lips—there were no secrets in Verkhnyaya Kamenka.

"Well, Tonya," she said, laying her pencil aside. "I'll have a word with the head of the crèche and recommend you. I think she'll take you. And you'll get a place in the nurses' hostel. You'll be able to live there until you get a room of your own. Then, in the autumn, you'll have



to start learning. We are going to begin training courses for nurses. Would that suit you?"

"Yes," said Antonina. "It would do me very well. Thank you, Maria Borisovna."

"There's no need to thank me, my dear. We need nurses for the crèche and nobody is showing you any charity. I hope you'll be happy and well."

Although Maria Borisovna had spoken to her seriously, sternly even, Antonina came out of the surgery looking much happier. Now she knew that everything was not lost. She knew that there would be happiness in life for her and for Igor.

Every mother thinks her baby better than all other babies. And Antonina thought her "little raven" beautiful when Maria Borisovna picked the baby up in a flannel blanket and said:

"Here is your son. Take good care of him. Remember that now he must be the most precious thing on earth for you."

"I shall remember that," replied Antonina. "The most precious thing, of course he is."

In the grey dress she had worn when she came to hospital Antonina walked out. She carried her baby herself, pressing it tightly to her breast as though afraid of dropping it.

Valya watched her through the window. She saw Dusya meet Antonina at the garden gate. Dusya said something to her and looked at a little bundle she was carrying, wrapped in a clean white cloth. Antonina shook her head and walked past her. Dusya was left alone. She frowned, looked angrily after Antonina; then a smile lit up her face as she hurried after her.

Chapter Thirteen

1

Not long after Yasha Milovidov had left the turnery to work in the garage two of his pals and drinking-companions gave notice that they intended to follow his example. Nikolai read and reread the slips of paper but could not make up his mind what to do next; he went to Yelena Protasova for advice.

"This is Yasha's work," she said with a frown. "He wins the boys over and his chief's delighted. They're just the kind of fellows that garage manager likes. He's a thief and twister himself. He'd steal the nose off your face without your noticing it, and now he's choosing his own sort to work with him. It's your affair, of course, but in your place I'd not let Skvortsov go. Let the Comsomol deal with him first. As for the other fellow, he's good riddance."

Yelena Protasova had virtually become Nikolai's assistant, someone whom he consulted before taking any step. They had become good friends and Nikolai was a frequent visitor at Protasova's home: she reminded him in some ways of his mother.

The Nazarenkos with their baby Ksenia were now lodging with Yelena Protasova. Nikolai and Vladimir did all kinds of odd jobs about the house: they fixed electric light in the pantry, mended the garden gate and built a dog kennel out of some old planks.

Nikolai liked to see how well Vladimir and Valya got on with each other; their relations were so natural and straightforward. Valya was still on maternity leave, and she spent the time in looking after Ksenia and cooking for Vladimir who had just time to get home for dinner during the break. Vladimir always invited Nikolai to come with him but Nikolai never went: he knew the Nazarenkos liked to spend that time alone, without visitors.

At other times, however, they had visitors in plenty: Valya was always glad to see them. She herself thought up reasons for inviting people: when Ksenia was a fortnight old, when they registered her birth. . . . It was easy enough to find a pretext for a party.

The day Ksenia's birth was registered and the little girl took her first step to full Soviet citizenship Valya invited Antonina round. Antonina came alone; she was now working in the crèche as a babies' nurse; her Igor was boarded there and could not be brought to parties.

Nikolai and Polina were the only others invited that evening. Polina brought Ksenia a present—a silk frock and some ribbons.

"Hello, Tonya," said Polina and kissed the girl on the cheek. "If I'd known you were going to be here I'd have brought your little man a present. I've got some nappies ready for him."

"Igor's got thousands of nappies, thank you," said Antonina with a withering look. "You can keep your presents to yourself."

Antonina did not stay long and hardly spoke a word. She left without saying good-bye properly—just nodded and slipped out of the room. Only then did Polina give vent to her feelings.

"That girl's crazy," she fumed with a toss of the head. "She ought to be meek and mild instead of behaving like a mad wolf. What is she after all? A babies' nurse!"

But Antonina found a stout champion in Valya.

"Look here, Polina, it's all very well for you to talk, you haven't any children. Tonya's doing a very important job. In the old days only the rich could afford to have nurses; if poor mothers couldn't nurse, their babies used to die. It's not that way now. If, for some reason or other, a mother can't feed her baby, the crèche looks after that and the baby gets mother's milk all the same. Any mother respects a nurse."

"The only kind of job I can respect is one that requires qualification. Take you, for instance. You're a trained typist, you've got education, you could work as a proof-reader. I've got my qualifications too—I can work as a comp. I can make up a newspaper. But what's Tonya got to show for herself? She can nurse a baby, that's all. No great wisdom required for that!"

Nikolai and Vladimir went on eating cake and kept out of the conversation. What a subject to argue about! But, as he watched Polina and heard her talk, Nikolai reflected that Andrei probably didn't find her too easy to get on with at work. Yet Andrei put up with her; he knew how to handle her touchy nature. He, Nikolai, on the other hand, had fallen out with old, experienced turners.

Nikolai and Vladimir had their own "masculine" topic of conversation—friendship. They talked about Yasha, admitting ruefully that both of them had been wrong in not noticing his failings. Or rather, not considering them important when they did notice them.

"Friendship is something you can't squander," said Nikolai. "It's sacred, you've got to choose your friends very carefully."

"I don't agree with you there," said Vladimir. "Nobody's perfect. If you're going to start being choosy you'll never have any friends: you'll become a lone wolf."

"Nobody's perfect, of course. But there are degrees of imperfection, you know. What's more, being friendly with someone doesn't mean that you have to tolerate everything he does. Friendship doesn't mean overlooking faults, it means making the highest possible demands on each other."

"I agree with you completely, Nikolai Nikolayevich," intervened Polina. "But some of our girls look at things differently. They think this way: you're my friend, so keep quiet about my failings. Now, I don't like that; if people behave badly I like to show them up. That's why people are afraid of me. They don't understand me."

"They don't understand you because you flare up about things so easily," said Vladimir, annoyed with Polina for breaking in on his talk with Nikolai. "You did right to expose Chumov, of course, but there's no point in flaring up about every little thing."

The tea-pot had long been cold. Ksenia lay asleep in her mother's arms. It was growing late. Autumn was approaching and the yellowing leaves rustled drily outside the window; a shooting star described a brilliant arc across the sky.

Valya was sitting at the window. Vladimir and Polina sat smoking at the table. Polina did not smoke as a rule, but now she had lit a cigarette and held it, her little finger sticking out. Valya realized that Polina was trying to make herself look different from other girls and that she thought smoking was something specially *chic*. But there was

nothing *chic* about the way Polina smoked: she drew short puffs, not at all like Vladimir who inhaled deeply.

At last the visitors rose and left. Valya smiled and nodded to them through the window as Vladimir saw them to the gate. The village was quiet; most people had gone to bed for the night; only at the Syurtukovs' and in one or two other houses lights were burning.

Nikolai saw Polina back to her hostel and walked on to the Stalin-grad. He wondered what Andrei was doing. Recently Andrei had seemed sad; he wrote home to his father every day, sat up writing poetry that he never showed to Nikolai. Nor, for that matter, had he shown Nikolai an article he had sent to a Moscow paper. Perhaps he thought it mightn't be printed. A long time had passed since Andrei had sent the article but there'd been no reply....

Nikolai whistled cheerfully as he walked down the well-lit street. He knew every house; in practically everyone of them lived a friend. He passed the hospital where Valya's baby was born. There were no lights burning in the maternity ward but the windows were open as they had been that night. And that window at the side with the white net curtain glowed brightly as it had done then.

The gate of the hospital grounds creaked and a woman in a white smock with a navy-blue jacket over her shoulders stepped out on to the pavement. She walked at an easy pace a little way ahead of Nikolai, passing in and out of pools of light from the lamp standards. Her neat, slender figure reminded Nikolai of the one he knew and loved so well. It couldn't be Nina, could it? Yet who but Nina could walk so lightly and swing her arm like that? And wasn't that her old attaché case? And whose hair could fluff out like that except Nina's?

Nikolai stopped and drew a deep breath. The distance between them lengthened. Nikolai's feet felt leaden but he made an effort and raced ahead. He felt like shouting "Nina" but no sound came.

Nina had not written for a long time. Every morning Nikolai had expected a letter giving him her new address; he was beginning to think he had lost her for ever.

"Nina! Is it you?" he called at last.

"Of course it is. Who did you mistake me for?"

How could he mistake those dancing eyes, that teasing voice? Swinging her attaché case, Nina stood before him, as precious and desirable as she had ever been in Moscow.

"Nina darling! Where've you sprung from?"

"I've been on duty in the maternity ward. Now I'm going home to my room."

"Home! You're joking."

"No, I'm not. I've been working here since yesterday."

Nina's voice sounded calm but her hand betrayed her feelings as it tugged and twisted her scarf. They were standing under a street standard—a cluster of glazed lamps cast a brilliant light which showed up every feature of their faces, so moved by this unexpected meeting.

"Why on earth didn't you write and tell me?"

"What for? Just to get another detailed description of the lovely weather and the scenery? I decided to come and see it all for myself."

She stood with her hands in her pockets, the familiar old jacket flung over her shoulders, the wind stirring her hair. Two young men passed by and looked hard at her.

Nikolai grasped Nina firmly by the arm. How strange it was to be walking with her through the streets, past the factory and the Stalingrad, where a light was burning in his room. So Andrei was home. Nikolai did not ask Nina in: he wanted to be alone with her, did not want to share, even with Andrei, the first hour of their miraculous, unexpected meeting. He asked Nina no more questions, simply walked in silence at her side, drawing her ever more closely to him.

"Are you in a hurry to get back?" he said when they reached the park. "Wouldn't you like to walk a bit longer?"

Nina nodded and they turned into the park. The tobacco-plants were flowering for the last time and their white star-shaped flowers gleamed in the darkness. Far away at the dance floor the band was playing its signing-off march; a noisy crowd was streaming along the central walk towards the exit, Nikolai caught sight of Lyuba and automatically looked for Andrei. Odd that Andrei wasn't with her: Lyuba was in a group of young factory workers and at her side there was a man Nikolai did not know.

"That path goes straight to the lake. Should we go and look at the lake, Nina?"

"Let's," said Nina. "And I'd like to go out in a boat."

Where were they to find a boat at this hour? The boatman had gone home and the boats were all tied up to the bank with the oars put away in the boat-house. Nikolai tried the door: to his delight it yielded—the padlock was only for appearance's sake.

"Take the oars," he said to Nina. "Look, those long ones."

Stooping cautiously, Nina went in: was it all right to take the oars without permission? What if the night watchman should turn up suddenly and make a fuss?

"He won't come," Nikolai assured her. "He's asleep long ago. The boat'll be safe enough with us. We'll go for a row and put everything back where we found it."

To unmoor a boat was even simpler; the painter was merely hitched round a stake. Nina stepped daintily in; Nikolai cast off from the landing-stage and they were floating on the smooth dark waters of the lake. How lightly the boat moved! How freely the oars rose and fell! How happy, strong and powerful Nikolai felt!

He looked at Nina: her face seemed to him pale and drawn. Could she have been lonely without him? Perhaps after all she wasn't so indifferent to him as he had imagined.

"How did you happen to get appointed to this very hospital, Nina?" Nikolai asked. "Did you ask specially or did it just happen?"

"What d'you think? D'you really imagine that out of the thousands of hospitals I might have gone to, I came here just by chance? Hey, look out, you've caught a crab. Sit still, you'll upset the boat."

But Nikolai had forgotten all about the boat. He slid off the thwart and sat down in the bottom of the boat at Nina's feet.

"So you came to find me, Nina darling," he whispered. "Is that really true? And here was I thinking. . . . Oh, what a fool I am, Nina, what a fool! Come on, give me a clout if you feel like it."



He pressed his lips to her hands, to her knees, to the white smock about which still clung an odour of medicine, of the familiar smells of the hospital. Even Nina's hands smelt of the hospital, but her face, her throat, her curly hair were fragrant with the scent of spring flowers.

"Ninotchka," Nikolai murmured. "Ninotchka. . . My darling, dearest, most precious. . ."

The night was over and the sky was growing light. A fisherman's canoe glided out of the reeds. It passed them silently—the lovers sat wrapped in each other's arms on the oarsman's seat, a navy-blue jacket over their shoulders; and the head of the girl lay submissively on the young man's shoulder.

"Ah, youth, youth," sighed the fisherman enviously. "That's the time for loving."

The sun was rising when Nikolai burst into the room. Andrei lay with a book in his hands; the lamp stood burning on the desk although the sun struck straight through the window.

"Andrei, I've got news for you. I'm going to get married," Nikolai shouted as he came in.

Andrei silently laid his book aside. His cheeks were hollow and there were dark shadows under his eyes as if he had passed through a serious illness; his eyes were sad.

"She's here," said Nikolai who noticed nothing. "She's come to work at the factory hospital."

Nikolai wanted to describe to Andrei how he had met Nina, and how he had told her at long last the things he had wanted to tell her in Moscow, and how Nina had replied that she had long been waiting for those words. Nikolai was so full of happiness that everything seemed marvellous and unusual to him—the dawn, the yellow leaves on the trees, his friendship with Andrei.

He slipped off his jacket, sat on the edge of Andrei's bed and looked into his friend's face; and only then did he notice how weary-looking that face was and how strange, almost tearful an expression burned in Andrei's eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked in alarm. "What's happened?"

Andrei said that nothing in particular had happened: he wasn't feeling well, hadn't been able to sleep and now his head ached.

"Don't mind me," he said with a smile. "I'm really glad about what you've told me. Really glad."

His smile was forced and weak but Nikolai was so blinded by the egoism of happiness that he noticed nothing. He attributed everything to illness and at once hurried into the corridor where a first-aid cabinet hung, found a headache powder and made Andrei take it.

"Tomorrow—I mean today—I'll bring Nina to see you," he said. "She'll get you well in a tick, you'll see."

Andrei closed his eyes and pretended to go to sleep; Nikolai, moving quietly so as not to disturb him, undressed and got into bed. He thought he would not be able to sleep but he fell off at once with a happy smile on his lips.

2

Shortly after Zhukov's visit to Verkhnyaya Kamenka, Stoletov and Andrei went in search of the prototype of the "shrew."

They found the machine in the farthest reaches of the factory grounds, in a place where the tree-stumps had not yet been rooted up and the young pine trees felled. From a distance it looked rather like a piece of artillery with the long barrel-like snout and the heavy caterpillars deeply embedded in the ground.

They looked the machine over, startling a flock of sparrows out of the driver's cab. The broad cutting-blade in the front of the machine was buried in earth over which the grass grew densely, the caterpillars were rusty and the transporter appeared to be partly dismantled.

"I can see now why Kovalev was so unwilling to show this to me," said Stoletov. "It really is a sorry sight.... Don't you think it would be a good idea, Andrei Borisovich, to tell the whole story of this invention in a long detailed article?"

"But we covered the subject with that letter from the designers, didn't we?"

"I'm not thinking of the *Tribuna* now. I mean an article for the Moscow press."

He looked at Andrei searchingly: would he agree to write the truth about the Kovalev invention? Would he be willing to expose the discreditable behaviour of Zhukov senior, the father of his friend? Would he have the courage to write a trenchant, hard-hitting article?

"You ought to put everything in," he went on. "The disgraceful vacillation; the story of the Kurzhen excavator which is being pushed solely because it's the brain child of the head office which includes Zhukov. Perhaps it's worth mentioning that Zhukov came here and tried to get the factory to drop its campaign for the Kovalev machine. Could you write an article about that, d'you think?"

"Of course I could," said Andrei. "And as for Zhukov I know him a good deal better than you do, Stepan Demyanovich."

Stoletov walked from the machine to a patch of shade under a skimpy pine and sat on the grass. Andrei sat down beside him and told him excitedly how this Zhukov had abandoned his family years before, how much Nik had missed his father and how he had envied Andrei in

this respect. Andrei mentioned the letter of introduction Zhukov had given his son, being sure Kovalev would help him.

"He knew at that time there wasn't a hope of Kovalev's invention being taken up. D'you see what I mean? He knew that, because he'd secured support for his own invention. He knew, because he's a leading official at head office. He knew how difficult it was—practically impossible—for Kovalev to push his own invention from outside Moscow. A good thing that Nikolai didn't want to use his father's influence and he tore up that letter. . . . But please, don't tell Kovalev that Nikolai is Zhukov's son."

"He knows," said Stoletov. "Zhukov told him when he was here. Kovalev respects your friend for not using the letter. . . ."

Time passed. The shade shifted. The heat grew oppressive; but neither Andrei nor Stoletov noticed it. They went on talking about Nikolai and Sharov and the young people of Verkhnyaya Kamenka and all the many fine people who worked at the factory.

Both of them found the conversation interesting and pleasant and were sorry when it was interrupted by the dinner-break hooter. Stoletov hurried away to keep his traditional "hour of the open door"; Andrei went to the Comsomol committee room to tell Lyuba about everything. But Lyuba was not in. A lean fellow who worked at the forge sat at her desk writing something with a sour look on his face.

"Zvonaryeva left for town," he told Andrei. "Pretended the district committee office had sent for her. But they rang up from there a short while ago and asked for her to tell them how the oil workers' order was going on. What can I do? She rushed away as if she'd lost her senses and didn't leave a thing for me. Maybe you can help."

Andrei was not particularly disconcerted by Lyuba's absence. It was even better so. He would sit down and write the article. He would finish it by the time she returned and she would be its first reader.

He spent the evening over the article. There was enough material for a booklet. When he had finished, he rang up Lyuba's room only to be told by her room-mate that she had not returned. She was not back the following morning either and Stoletov was the first to read the article. Stoletov liked it and said that it ought to be posted to Moscow without delay.

"I'm sure it'll be published. Send it air mail. It'll reach the paper tomorrow. Then we start looking for it when the Moscow papers come in." He found a large blue envelope, put the article in it and said jokingly: "Touch wood."

After posting the letter Andrei dropped into the Comsomol office again. Lyuba was not there; a man's cap lay on her desk; a typist was copying the details of the oil workers' order.

"You don't happen to know where Zvonaryeva is, do you?" asked Andrei as he glanced through the material. "Didn't she say when she was coming back?"

"She's here," said the typist with a knowing look. "But she went out again as soon as she arrived. Maybe she's gone to your office."

But Lyuba was not at the *Tribuna*. Vanya Poperechny had seen her with the manager of the building department—she'd probably gone to see how they were getting on with the new house. Andrei would like to have

gone in search of her straight away but he had to see the paper to press, ring up the designing office and write an editorial. That took him several hours. Lyuba could easily have come to his office during that time but there was no sign of her.

Then Andrei wrote her a note:

"Where have you got to, Lyuba? This is a special day for me: I've sent an article to Moscow. I very much wanted you to be the first to read it but I could not find you in. I long to see you; I can't live without you. Come to me Lyuba my love. Your Andrei."

He placed the note on Lyuba's desk and went back to his work, all the time expecting Lyuba to come.

But still she did not come. Andrei saw her only in the evening and then by mere chance: they met by the factory gates. Andrei, delighted, hurried towards her.

"Where've you been?" he asked, grasping her hand. "I looked for you yesterday and all today. . . . I've got heaps of news."

"I went into town," Lyuba said, in a worried tone, avoiding Andrei's eyes. "Excuse me but I'm in a hurry now: I have a young workers' technical conference to go to in the new machine shop."

"Come to the *Tribuna* office afterwards," Andrei begged, not releasing her hand. "Did you find my note?"

"Yes," said Lyuba and, snatching her hand away, she hurried through the gates.

"Lyuba," cried Andrei. "Wait a minute."

But she did not hear him, or pretended not to. She hastened on, head down as if she wanted to ward off some invisible menace or felt ashamed of something. Andrei took a few steps after her, then, noticing the look of sympathy on the face of the girl gate-keeper, realized that Lyuba did not want to see him.

Andrei walked back to his office, sat down and stared blankly at an article Vanya handed him. Vanya was explaining something, he was excited and indignant, but Andrei did not take in a word.

"I'm sorry," he interrupted, "I've got a headache. We'll print that tomorrow."

He went out and waited in the garden for work to finish and everybody to leave. He could not believe that Lyuba would drop him without a word of explanation: she was sure to come after her conference and explain what had happened.

When Andrei returned to the office he found it dark and empty. The only sound came from the print-shop where the printer was finishing a job for the management. Andrei switched on the light and sat down at his desk listening to the steps in the passage, to voices in the factory yard, to the rain pattering on the roof. A clean sheet of paper lay in front of him: he meant to write to his father about the article but did not get beyond putting the date in the right-hand corner.

Would she come? And if so, what would she say? Why had she looked so scared to see him at the factory gates?

He had waited for Lyuba on other occasions but never for long; he would hear her light steps in the passage and in she would come saying to him from the door: "Hello, what's the news today?" She meant: "What's in the paper?" but Andrei's eyes would reply, "I love you, I love you." Could she have failed to understand what his eyes had told her?

The minutes dragged on. The clock went on ticking. The weights had almost touched the floor; he would have to wind it up. Andrei rose, started to wind up the clock, when suddenly the door opened.

Lyuba came into the office as she had done dozens of times before. She wore that familiar blue frock, the knitted jumper with red buttons—one of them she had lost not long ago and Andrei had looked for it in the grass. She had no hat on and her hair was arranged differently—more simply and smoothly. Her face, too, seemed different, she looked very resolute as if she were about to take a high dive into cold water.

Andrei tried to force a smile but it was unnatural and soon faded. "I knew you'd come. I've been waiting such a long time."

How many times had Lyuba sat on that wooden bench beneath the picture of Lenin, waiting for Andrei to finish his work? And now she sat there again, leaning against the high hard back of the bench, her elbow resting on the little table as usual.

For some time not a word was spoken. Lyuba stared at the dark window; the clock slowly ticked off the seconds....

"Tell me, Andrei, is it true... what you wrote in that note?"

"Yes, it's true. Why should I tell you something that isn't true?"

"I didn't mean that. But—perhaps you exaggerated...."

"I didn't exaggerate anything. I love you."

Andrei rose to his feet, walked across the room and sat down beside Lyuba. He tried to take her hand but she pretended to smooth a crease in her frock and edged away from him.

"Didn't you like to find that out, Lyuba?"

He looked at her searchingly and saw the colour flood her cheeks.

"It wouldn't be true if I said no," Lyuba said in a low voice. "Every girl likes to know she is loved.... But, Andrei dear, I love someone else."

She raised her head and her clear candid eyes met Andrei's. He did not utter a word. There was pain and longing in his eyes. Only the patter of the rain on the window disturbed the quiet in the room.

Lyuba expected Andrei to reproach her, to raise his voice, to stamp out of the room, slamming the door behind him. But he asked no questions, did not go away. He fixed his eyes on something far, far away and his lips twisted in a strange, painful smile.

"That's all," Lyuba whispered. She could stand the silence no longer. "That's all. Perhaps I should have told you about it earlier. You've every right to consider that I've treated you shabbily and that I've been a little coward."

"Nothing could make me think that," said Andrei hoarsely. "Nothing. You know that very well.... But tell me one thing, Lyuba, didn't you love me at all?"

With lowered head, fighting back the tears that came to her eyes, she tried to explain, to tell him how it all had come about. Whose fault had it been? That was a very hard question to answer.

"You see, I've been in love with him for a long time. He loves me too, really seriously. But he's been away for some months on an assembly job, and then you came and it all started.... I saw it at once, I realized the way you felt about me and I also began to think, began to...."

Lyuba spoke haltingly, almost inaudibly. How was she to explain that she had struggled with herself: she had wanted to see him, yet she

had avoided meeting him: she had wanted to respond to his kiss, yet she had been afraid to; she had wanted to be honest and deceive no one, yet she had deceived herself. It was hard to tell all that, but told it had to be.

"Don't think I'm trying to make excuses. Believe me, it's not easy for me; I've paid dearly for being so vain and for not being straight with you. I felt flattered that someone like you should like me. . . . I lost my head, I forgot everything and then I came to my senses and told myself it had to stop."

"Perhaps you were wrong?"

There was hope in Andrei's voice; he grasped Lyuba's hand and tried to turn her towards him. But she withdrew her hand, rose and walked to the door.

"No, I wasn't wrong," she said. "It's not you I love, Andrei. Forgive me and don't think too badly of me."

That was how Lyuba broke with Andrei.

For several days Andrei could not control his sorrow. He lived like an automaton, mechanically doing all he had to do: he worked because the print-shop needed material for the paper; he went to the canteen because it was dinner time; he went to bed because it was bed time. But the only thing he really felt was the misfortune that had befallen him. It was so unexpected. There was nobody he could talk to about it, he had to bear his grief alone. Again and again he relived every moment he had spent with Lyuba, and each time it was more painful. He kept asking himself the same questions, but could find no answers.

How had it all happened? It seemed to him now that he had fallen in love with Lyuba on the day of his arrival when he saw her come, angry and tearful, into the Party committee room. Then, or perhaps at that Comsomol meeting where the oil workers' letter had been discussed? Or in the woods near that stream when she had not responded to his kiss? But did it really matter when? Love had possessed him utterly and that was something Lyuba must have noticed.

But why had he not noticed that she was in love with somebody else? He should have done. Why, Lyuba herself had mentioned an assembly worker called Grisha who had been to the same technical school; she'd grown friendly with him, wrote to him now that he was away. She'd often mentioned him but Andrei hadn't attached any special significance to her words.

And then, hadn't she always been curiously reluctant to talk about love, never letting him kiss her and at once becoming stern and unapproachable whenever he tried? And what was it that Dusya used to sing so often in that mocking way of hers? "In vain, my friend, you walk this way." Yes, that was all true but he'd been deaf and blind to it all—he hadn't noticed a thing. . . .

And now, when he loved her more than ever, everything became clear. It was a blow he found hard to take; he could not share his feelings even with Nikolai. And that morning when Nikolai came dashing into the room, his friend's joy left him unmoved. He listened indifferently and then waited for Nikolai to fall asleep. And then he decided to go outside. But where? It was Sunday, the office was closed, there was no work to do. Yet he simply had to go out. Andrei slipped quietly out of bed, dressed and shut the door behind him.

He walked down the street. The pale autumn sun gilded the walls of the building opposite. A crowd of school children were pouring through the doors of a shop to buy pencils, notebooks, satchels. Andrei walked into the shop aimlessly.

"I want a notebook, please," he said, when he caught the assistant's eye over the heads of the children. "One of those with the black cover."

Then he walked along a narrow path between thick old elms towards the forest. The path wound its way up to the top of the hill. Flattened rocks jutted over it. Nettles and wild raspberries grew among the stones. The earth was dry and slid in a gentle rustle under Andrei's feet.

Scrambling up the last stony stretch, Andrei reached the top of the hill. An eagle had only just taken off from there, for a feather still fluttered on a boulder and the eagle could be seen flying over the tree tops with lazy sweeps of its wings. The woods stretched all around, deep green, yellow, red. They swallowed up all paths and roads so that there was nothing to be seen but sky and foliage.

Andrei sat on a sun-warmed rock and rested his eyes on a small twisted birch tree with scanty copper-coloured leaves. That tree would never grow up into one of those slender well-proportioned birches that you saw down below. It would always be twisted, wizened, impoverished. Farther down the hill slope the birches had not yet shed their leaves or changed their colour; only a few yellowing streaks appeared among the green, like an ageing man's grey hairs. . . .

Where was Lyuba now? Perhaps she was walking along that very road which led to the river, there where that great boulder protruded. Once she had sat on that boulder, her face tilted to the sun—to that same sun that was shining today. . . .

3

Early the next morning Andrei was awakened by Sasha, the hostel warden, bursting into the room.

"Telegram for you," he announced exultantly.

There were only four words in the telegram: "Congratulations article published Dad."

Sasha beamed at Andrei. How proud he was to have such a man living at the Stalingrad!

Nikolai too was delighted.

"Why, it's wonderful, Andrei," he said. "Let's see, the telegram was sent last night. That means yesterday's paper. It'll reach here this afternoon. Be sure to bring a copy to the shop. Just as soon as it arrives."

Nikolai was in a hurry to get to work. He ran out of the room and took the stairs three at a time. He felt happy and light-hearted, pleased with everything in the world: Nina loved him, things were going better in the shop, the mountain tops were capped with marvellous clouds, even the light drizzle had something pleasing about it. Everything was beautiful, splendid to the last degree. Everything except for. . . . Ah, Lyuba Zvonaryeva was the only fly in the ointment. To think that she could prefer a tow-headed fellow from the assembly shop to Andrei. . . . True, people said they'd been friends a long time, that it was an old love affair; but if that was so why had Lyuba turned Andrei's head?

Dusya had called the relations between Andrei and Lyuba "lyrical friendship." "What if that Andrei of yours had chosen to fall in love with me?" she asked Nikolai. "D'you think I'd have to leave my Vasya just so as not to disappoint Andrei? There's such a thing as lyrical friendship between people, isn't there? Lyuba was certain that was the kind of friendship she had with Andrei. It's not her fault that he fell in love with her."

But Nikolai saw things differently. This "lyrical friendship" business was Dusya's invention to take the blame off Lyuba. Of course Lyuba was to blame. Who if not he was the one to know that? He'd heard with his own ears how Lyuba talked to Andrei. "The moon looks like a boat." One doesn't say things like that—and in such a voice—just to a friend. A good thing that article of Andrei's was printed. It might take his mind off the other matter.

But it didn't. True, when someone brought him the newspaper and he read his name at the foot of a two-column article, Andrei felt something akin to joy and pride. But what pleasure he took in the fact was short-lived; he thought of Lyuba even when he was reading the article. It was all the same to her whether the article had appeared or not. If only Lyuba were pleased to see that article. . . .

Lyuba, in fact, was delighted. She came into the *Tribuna* office waving the paper, congratulated Andrei and said that now Kovalev would feel better about things. What a pity he was on his holidays.

"He's back," said Vanya Poperechny. "I saw him in the shop earlier on."

"Go and see him, Andrei. Straight away," said Lyuba. "He probably hasn't read the paper yet. By the way, does Nikolai mind the way you've criticized his father?"

The mention of Nikolai reminded Andrei that he had not shown him the article yet. How could he have overlooked that? He'd been so wrapped up in his own misfortune that he'd forgotten all about Nikolai. He made straight for the turnery.

"Has the paper come? Got it? Hand it over, let's see it," Nikolai said smiling broadly.

"I haven't got it with me, Nik. I must talk to you for a moment."

"What? Now? Wouldn't it do after work?"

"No, it's got to be now."

It was hard to broach a subject which was bound to cause Nikolai pain. But a start had to be made and Andrei forced himself to tell the hard truth about the Kurzhen machine and the part Zhukov had played in the affair, and how he, Andrei, had to write that truth and how it had been published in the Moscow press the day before.

Many fleeting expressions crossed Nikolai's pale face as he sat there and listened to Andrei's tale. They were sitting on the broad window-sill next to Nikolai's section near a number of lathes on which fluttered the red pennants that were the mark of victory in Socialist emulation. Bending down over the cutting tool, Yelena Protasova was at work on one of these lathes; near by, Vladimir Nazarenko, head tilted, was scrutinizing a part he had just turned. The lathes ran with a smooth hum.

"I should have told you about it earlier," said Andrei. "But somehow I didn't. Don't be sore with me, I'm feeling bad enough as it is."

Nikolai shook his head in silence. Why should he feel sore with Andrei? He looked at Yelena Protasova, at Syurtukov who passed by with a smile and a friendly wave of the hand. He thought of Nina who would read that article and asked himself how she would be taking the references to his father.

"I ought to tell Nina about it," he said. "A pity I didn't know earlier. What if she should think I've been keeping it from her."

"I'll tell her myself if you like. I'll go and see her straight away."

"No, I'll tell her. . . . Don't think this worries me very much. After all, you know my relations with my father."

If all this had happened before Nina had come to Verkhnyaya Kamenka, he would probably have found it more painful and unpleasant. But now his happiness was so abundant, so overflowing, that it would be difficult, well-nigh impossible, to spoil his mood. Andrei, maybe, couldn't understand that: he had no Nina. . . .

"I don't care a damn about that Kurzhen of his," said Nikolai. "I'll be delighted if Kovalev turns out to be the winner in the end. Don't give any ground, Andrei; insist on getting a reply out of the Ministry. And don't imagine that I could get sore with you about a thing like that. . . . Now give me the paper, it's sticking out of your pocket."

4

In the *Tribuna* appeared the following message from the oil workers: "The first machines have arrived. The quality is excellent. Thank you. Please let us know the names of the best workers on this order. We wish to put them on our board of honour."

In the next column appeared the names of the best workers. It was a long list including foundry workers, riveters, turners and assembly workers. Nikolai's name was there: his section was among the first in the machining process.

Nobody knew for certain whether all those names would appear on the oil workers' board of honour, but the *Tribuna* gave the full list and, moreover, framed it with a fancy border. The chairman of the factory trade-union committee let it be known that the list would be considered when the question arose of whose pictures were to be put up in the square for the anniversary of the Revolution celebrations in November.

Nikolai was very proud to be among the leading workers. In the evening he snatched the newspaper from Andrei's hand and took it, still damp from the press, to show Nina. On the way he tried to think up some excuse for coming to see her so late in the evening: he felt slightly ashamed to have to admit the real reason. He decided to ask her to mend a hole in the pocket of his jacket. That was a wife's job, wasn't it?

What an odd thing it was! Here they were married, yet, he had to admit to himself, he still felt a little afraid of her, Nina ruled the roost all right. . . .

Nina lived at the hospital in a room looking rather like a ward itself with its narrow beds, glossy white stools and bedside lockers. She shared this room with Zina, a girl of her own age who worked as a dental surgeon. Zina, however, was hardly ever in; she spent every evening at the club or the cinema or else went into town to visit a girl friend, and then she would stay overnight. She was out this time too. Nina was alone,

sitting at a small table on which a sheet served as table-cloth. She was writing a letter home.

"I was afraid you might be asleep," said Nikolai, kissing her. "It's simply awful living apart like this. It's so dull, and I have to come all this way for every little trifle."

He slipped off his jacket and complained that there was a hole in the pocket: why, he'd almost lost an important paper that very day; he'd wanted to mend it himself but couldn't find his needle. And, anyway, it seemed funny—a married man having to mend his own clothes.

"It's not at all funny," said Nina, looking at the tear. "In the first place, this ought to have been mended long ago. Secondly, needles are not made to be lost. What if it should turn up in your bed? You'd soon know what it was if it pricked you."

She opened a prettily painted box, slipped a thimble on her finger and got ready to start sewing.

"Wait a minute; let me empty my pocket first," said Nikolai, taking out a wallet and the folded newspaper. "By the way, that's tomorrow's *Tribuna*, if you're interested."

"I'm not," said Nina testily. "I'm never going to read that horrid paper again. Andrei ought to be ashamed of himself. Goes and prints an inaccurate, ill-tempered article about the hospital and then doesn't print our denial."

"Maybe it's in this very number," said Nikolai slyly. "I'll leave it for you, if you like."

"I'm not going to read it, I tell you. You needn't try to make me change my mind."

"But that article wasn't all wrong," objected Nikolai. "I remember it: you were in too much of a hurry to send someone back to work and then he had a relapse and the polyclinic put him back in bed."

"If that patient hadn't gone out digging potatoes the day after he left hospital, he wouldn't have fallen ill again. We reckoned on him doing light work in the shop and off he goes to his allotment. That article was written by a doctor in the polyclinic who's always slinging mud at the hospital. And Andrei prints it without even checking the facts at the hospital."

Nina's hand moved to and fro, drawing the black thread through the air; her silver thimble glittered in the bright light that came from a table-lamp with a net shade. She looked angry.

"D'you understand what that patient did or don't you?" she asked, tapping the table with the thimble. "He spoiled our work. We took care of him, gave him the best treatment, nursed him, and then he goes and spoils it all. What would you say if someone took a delicate piece of machinery and used it to crush stones with?"

"You should have warned him to go carefully."

"Warn him? That's just the point. We did. He was anxious to get back to work, so we let him go, but Maria Borisovna gave him quite a lecture before she signed him out. And now it appears that the only reason he wanted to leave us so quickly was to dig his potatoes. I'm furious with Andrei for the attitude he took and I'd like you to tell him so."

Nikolai looked at Nina solemnly but held his tongue. Hadn't they an agreement that Andrei was to be considered their closest friend, practi-

cally a member of the family? So why was Nina jumping on Andrei because of some article or other? That broke their agreement, didn't it?

Not long ago Andrei had printed an article criticizing Nikolai's work. Of course, that had stung Nikolai considerably but he hadn't lost his wool about it and never let the idea enter his head that Andrei ought to let him down lightly because they were friends. Was the fact that Nina happened to work at the hospital any reason why Andrei shouldn't print a criticism of it?

His face expressionless, Nikolai unfolded the paper and glanced through it. The panel with the names of the leading workers looked most effective. That was Polina's work and she'd done it proud. It really was nice to see one's own name there. "N. N. Zhukov— foreman of turning section." Was Nina going to miss that?

But, though Nikolai did not notice it, Nina was looking not at the paper but at him.

"I have every right to feel angry with Andrei," she said stubbornly. "You know that very well."

Her voice had an edge to it, but when Nikolai looked up from the paper she had dropped her eyes; she was nipping the thread with her teeth.

"The only thing I know is that our agreement is still in force. Stop being angry, Nina darling, and stop mending that wretched hole. I'll keep my papers in another pocket."

"I don't want you to go round looking like a scarecrow. Holes are meant to be mended."

Nina spoke in her best schoolmarm's manner, and went on sewing. She must have inherited that tone from her mother or her grandmother. "Holes are meant to be mended." "You've got to take a bath at least once a week." "Shoes have to be cleaned every day." And so forth and so on. Copy-book maxims that he'd heard in his childhood till he was sick to death of them. What if he didn't have time to clean his shoes every day? What if he preferred to spend the time he saved in the shop? Or to run to the hospital and wait till Nina was free after an operation? Why should she start nagging him about his shoes instead of responding to his kiss?

"You admire Andrei so much," said Nina caustically, "that I just don't understand why you don't copy the best quality he has— that of always being neat and tidy. Andrei's always spick and span, but you go around unshaven and, what's more, think I like you for it."

Nikolai distractedly raised his hand to his chin. Nina was right: he *did* need a shave. He'd meant to drop in to the barber's but he'd been in such a hurry to see Nina that he'd forgotten.

"Very well, next time I'll come shaved and scented but I'll be an hour later, you realize."

"That'll suit me all right."

Why was Nina so irritable? Why was her voice getting more and more strained? Why, when she had mended the torn lining, did she toss the coat on the chair like that?

"There you are," she said, avoiding Nikolai's eyes. "You can put it on now."

"Thank you, I'll not trouble you with such things in future."

Nina cast him a scornful look and pointedly resumed her unfinished

letter. She jabbed the pen into the ink-pot, pondered for a moment and started to write. . . .

If they lived together, if this room was their home, Nikolai wouldn't have felt hurt at Nina going on writing. But now he was a guest whose visit might be interrupted at any moment by Zina's arrival. Oh no, this was too much.

In silent rage Nikolai put on his jacket, picked up his cap and took his overcoat off the hanger.

"Good-bye," he said drily.

Nina did not even look up. Apparently he wasn't worth a glance, let alone a good-night kiss. All right, let it be. He wasn't going to eat humble pie before her.

The night was cold and clear. The stars shone brightly, frost lay on the dry grass, the trees had nearly all shed their leaves. Only the poplars remained green and dense, as in summer. Nikolai ran along the long avenue of poplars from the hospital to the main gates, thinking that Nina was obviously not in love with him. She was using every opportunity to humiliate him, to assert her superiority, to underline that she was perfect and he a mere worm.

She hadn't wanted to look at the list of honour in the paper—no need to. Instead, she'd given him a lecture as if he were a little boy.

What was to be done about it? The main thing was to work in such a way that she'd realize the sort of man she was dealing with. No slip of a student whom she could boss but the foreman of a large section, a man respected and appreciated. Next, he would have to be curt and independent with her. And lastly, he wouldn't rush to the hospital to see her; let her come to the Stalingrad; let her feel lonely, let her cry a bit for him.

But if she didn't feel lonely? If she didn't cry, but only got more angry?

When Nikolai reached the Stalingrad he saw the light burning in his room. What a good thing Andrei hadn't gone to sleep yet. He'd tell him the whole story, explain how Nina had been behaving the last few days, how hard he found it, how she had hurt him. Andrei would understand everything, he'd tell him what to do, help him. . . .

"So that's how things are, Andrei. What shall I do next?"

Andrei put his book aside, stroked his cheek and looked at the dark, uncurtained window.

"I really don't know, Nik. You've probably got to learn to respect each other, to trust and love each other. Although sometimes things go completely wrong even when you believe in someone, even when you love someone. . . ."

The window was blank; the mountains, the lake, the opposite shore, all were swallowed up in the darkness. The window panes reflected the table-lamp, a pile of crumpled papers, and Andrei's face.

"She's always bossing me, treats me like a little boy. And I'm not going to stand it. Especially when it comes to matters of principle. I'm not going to yield except on little things that don't matter."

"But what matters of principle do you quarrel about?"

"Every quarrel we have comes down to a matter of principle. She wants to be the boss. But I understand things as well as she does, don't

"Today she was furious with you about that article of yours on the hospital. Looked at the question from her own narrow point of view and didn't want to see she was wrong. I can't agree with her on that sort of thing...."

"That's all nonsense, Nik. Tomorrow you'll make it up and be happy.... There's something else you ought to be thinking about, though—how soon you can set up house together."

Together.... Andrei had no idea how often Nina and Nikolai had talked about the way things would be when all three of them lived together under the same roof. Nikolai did not want to move anywhere unless Andrei came with them. What they dreamed about was not a bed-sitter but a flat of two or three rooms where they could all live. Nina raised no objections to that. She agreed to wait for a flat.

But recently Nina had been saying more and more often that she felt lonely in the evenings when Nikolai wasn't with her and she had to listen to Zina's chatter instead of being able to say something important to Nikolai. Once Nina even cried on parting with Nikolai; it'd been so lovely sitting there quietly, just the two of them, and then Zina came bursting in with some girl-friend of hers and their privacy was shattered.

So Nina burst into tears when she saw Nikolai to the gate. They sat on a garden bench out there with Nina's overcoat over them, because Nikolai had come without his overcoat and it had started drizzling. But even in the rain the narrow bench in the hospital garden was better than anywhere else, because they were alone there.

"I'm afraid we'll have to wait a long time for a separate flat," Nina complained. "All we two need is a small single room."

Nikolai hugged her hard and kissed her rain-spangled hair.

"We'll manage to wait, darling. We must wait. We can't let old Andrei down, specially now he's in trouble and is so much on his own."

Andrei could not be allowed to know of this conversation. Nikolai never mentioned his plans to him: let Andrei consider him a bungler, let him think that Nina and he couldn't arrange things properly for themselves.

"It's not because we're living apart that we quarrel like this," Nikolai said firmly. "And don't you try and push me out of here."

Chapter Fourteen

I

A nurse in the surgical ward mentioned that there was some inexpensive silk on sale in the shop.

"It's lovely. Dark blue with polka dots. Just suit you, Tonya. You haven't got one pretty frock."

Antonina dragged her suitcase from under the bed, counted her savings and came to the conclusion that she could easily afford to get herself a new dress. She'd have it made in time for the November holidays. She knew somebody across the lake who'd make her a really pretty one and wouldn't charge much.

Putting the money in her bag, Antonina hurried to the shop. It was a sunny morning with a touch of frost whitening the brown grass and mak-

ing the sand scrunch underfoot. As she ran she looked for the frozen puddles, for she liked to break the brittle surface with her feet.

Everything, indeed, pleased her that morning: the blue, summery sky and the cool, scented air and the refreshing feeling she felt in every limb. On the previous day she had gone to the public baths, soaped herself thoroughly and even taken a steam bath; she had slept well and now felt unusually light-hearted and happy. As she ran she hummed a song she had just heard over the wireless, a song about a girl who is trying to talk a certain Seryozha into taking her out. Seryozha replies very seriously that he is much too busy with the harvest just now but that afterwards he'd be happy to kiss her till morn.

For some reason, Antonina did not care for that Seryozha whom she imagined not as a young fellow but as a shrivelled, middle-aged man with a reddish stubble on his chin. The tune was pretty, though, and the words had stuck in her memory.

She ran through the park, where there was not a soul to be seen that chilly Sunday morning. The place looked neglected, unwelcoming. The benches had been stacked on the band-stand where the band used to play in the summer, the kiosks and booths were boarded up. True, the pine trees looked as beautiful as ever, but the shrubs were thin and quite leafless: the wind had carried all the foliage away.

"But after the harvest we'll kiss till the morn," Antonina sang at the top of her voice. Suddenly she faltered and came to an abrupt stop: at a bend in the path lay a man. He wore a light-coloured shirt, his jacket was unbuttoned, and over his legs an overcoat had been thrown. He lay with his legs drawn up and his head leaning against the foot of the tree. He seemed to be asleep.

There was nothing to be frightened of, Antonina assured herself and walked on. What if the man were ill and needed some first aid?

She drew nearer and suddenly recognized Yasha. He was snoring, drunk probably. His shirt was badly stained, his face bruised and dirty, his cap had fallen off and in his glossy dark hair were bits of withered grass.

Petrified, Antonina stood over the sleeping Yasha. She had not seen him for a long time; she had avoided meeting him, she didn't want to see him, she was afraid. And now they had met like this! Yasha lay there, looking like a corpse with that pale face and tight-shut eyes and the hands clenched on his chest. In fact had it not been for the snores she'd have taken him for a corpse.

All Antonina's gay light-heartedness vanished. Perplexed and alarmed she stared at the sunken eyes, the dark brow, the pale neck. No, her old love for him was not dead, it lay somewhere deep within her.

Yasha must be cold. The ground was like ice.

She stooped, tugged at his coat to make him get up and go home into the warmth. The coat did not yield; Yasha's body was pressing on it with all its weight. Antonina pulled harder.

"Don't touch that coat!" Yasha muttered hoarsely. "Keep your hands off it, or else..."

He half opened his eyes and saw the thin girlish legs in cotton stockings, the patched shoes, the hem of a dress and a hand clutching his coat. Someone was trying to get him to his feet.

"Is that you, Zoya?" he muttered, without looking up. "Lie down here beside me and we'll keep each other warm. . . ."

He stretched out a hand and made a grab for Antonina's ankle. She stepped back.

"Oh no, you won't get away from me," he sneered and crawled along the ground. "Come here, my little swallow. . . ."

If Yasha had not used that phrase, nothing, perhaps, would have happened. Antonina would have run on, and that would have been the end of it. But with those words everything swam before her eyes and she swung her foot hard at Yasha and only then hurried along the path, clutching her breast.

"You little bitch," Yasha shouted after her. "I'll teach you. Don't think you can get away from me."

Yasha's voice rose to a plaintive whimper like that of a dog that is being whipped; Antonina pressed her hands to her ears to shut out the sound. Catching sight of a figure ahead of her, she slipped down a path to the side and then darted across the grass, her dress catching on the bare branches of the shrubs. The blood roared in her ears. Or was it the throb of her heart? She thought she could hear footsteps coming up behind her; Yasha must be on her trail; surely those were his feet drumming on the frozen ground.

"Dear mother, defend me, save me from him," she prayed. "He'll kill me. Oh, don't let little Igor be left an orphan."

She tripped, fell headlong and lay still, too terrified to raise her head. High overhead a pine rocked slowly, portentously; a red-breasted bullfinch perched for a moment on a twig, fluttered its tail and flew off; all the natural beauty around her spelled a lofty calm but Antonina saw nothing of this. Then something scratched her cheek and she felt her hand grow numb with cold. Dashing a dry stalk from her face, she sat up and cried. She felt sorry for herself. Fancy running into him on such a lovely morning. He and his "little swallow"!

Brushing the grass off her skirt and jacket, Antonina wiped her tear-stained face and hurried on. She simply had to buy that material for the dress; if the blue silk with the polka dots had gone it would mean she wouldn't have a nice-looking dress for the holidays.

The shop was very full; but over the heads of the customers crowding against the counter Antonina saw the silk she wanted. There it was on the shelf, the brightest of blue and all over it the different-coloured dots dancing so merrily.

"Too bright for me," said one woman, eyeing the silk. "It creases, too. I crumpled it in my hand for a moment and it came out all creases."

What a silly woman, thought Antonina. Who wanted to crumple a silk frock in her hand?

"Please cut me three metres of that silk up there," she called over the shoulders of the other customers.

That was really good luck. There was something left over, too, to buy a present for Igor—some flannelette with a pink check pattern.

Antonina took her parcel and left the shop. The sun was pale and had little warmth in it; but it set the frost sparkling on the iron railings of the gardens and spread pools of light on the walls of the new house. That was the house where Valya and Vladimir Nazarenko lived—they had moved in as soon as it was finished.

Antonina decided to call on Valya. She'd see how they were settling down. Valya had often invited her to drop in any time she liked.

She climbed the staircase, which still had traces of plaster on it, and rang the bell. A woman she did not recognize opened the door and told her that Valya was in the kitchen. But before Antonina had time to go in there, Valya ran out to meet her in the passage.

"Hello, Tonya," she said with delight. "Why, Vladimir's on his way to see you. We're giving our house-warming party today."

Valya was in a house-coat and apron; hair-curlers poked out from under her bright kerchief. She kissed Antonina, bringing with her the warm smells of the kitchen, and led the way to her room.

"Vladimir's gone to see Andrei Borisovich," she said. "Then he's going on to Zhukov. D'you remember that young doctor at the hospital, that's Zhukov's wife, you know. Then he was going on to two boys in the band and then to you. We only decided yesterday to have a party—it was pay day, you know—well, how d'you like the room?"

She threw open the door and stopped on the threshold, inviting Antonina's admiration. The room was large and light. There was a bed with a neat, pretty counterpane on it, a table with an embroidered cloth, a wardrobe with a mirror—everything quite new and very spick and span. Even the leaves of the plants on the window-sill seemed to be specially glossy; the polished floor was spotless.

"D'you remember that competition the girls organized in the hostel?" she asked Antonina. "For the tidiest bed and the best room, remember? Well, I look after this room just as if we still had a competition."

She looked with alarm at Antonina's dusty shoes and wiped her own slippers on a mat near the door. Antonina took the hint and did likewise.

"And look, there's Ksenia's corner—little cot, table and cupboard," said Valya, as if Antonina was unable to distinguish these things for herself. "Vladimir took her out with him. Fresh air's good for her, you know."

Antonina examined the room enviously. If only she and Igor had a place like that! She'd arrange a corner for him—the best corner of the room—and she'd keep the place just as clean as Valya did; she'd have flowers too. Of course, Igor was all right: the factory crèche had everything he needed, but how could it be compared with a room like this?

Antonina did not want Valya to notice how much she envied her; but she could not resist praising the room, the curtains, the baby-cot. Then she showed Valya her purchases.

"I'm going to have a dress made for the holidays," she said. "And this will be for Igor next summer."

"Oh, it's lovely silk, Tonya," exclaimed Valya, laying the material over Antonina's shoulder.

Antonina looked into the mirror and saw herself transformed into a stranger—slight and pretty as a butterfly.

"Valya! the cake's burning, come and take it out!" cried Dusya Syurtukova, dashing into the room. "Hello, Tonya, come to help?"

Noticing the piece of silk, Dusya wound it over her shoulder and turned in front of the mirror. She asked Antonina what dressmaker she was going to give it to and when Antonina told her, argued that Anto-

nina's dressmaker would spoil it. She'd be much wiser to use a dressmaker she, Dusya, knew.

Antonina listened and nodded assent. She agreed to go with Dusya to her dressmaker, she had no objection to Dusya choosing the pattern, she agreed to the frills that Valya suggested. But she would make the suit for Igor herself—a young mother had promised to give her the pattern.

"Promised!" Dusya said scornfully. "I'll cut you a pattern for it straight away. If you knew how many suits like this I've made for my Mitya."

She snatched a newspaper from the top of the bookcase, found a pair of scissors, pulled the cloth off the table and set about cutting out a pattern.

"See, there's the sleeve. And that's the front hem. That's the back. There's the trouser-leg. This is where you put the pocket—boys like little pockets, you know. And there's the place for the straps over the shoulders. You don't need a pattern for them."

The scraps of newspaper slipped on to the clean floor; the table-cloth hung crumpled from the corner of the table. Antonina glanced over her shoulder in alarm: what if Valya were to see the mess they were making, wouldn't she be angry?

"Don't let that worry you," said Dusya. "After all, what's the point of all this scrubbing and polishing she does? Mother's pretty keen on cleanliness but we believe home's meant for man and not man for the home."

In her heart of hearts Antonina did not agree with Dusya. She liked everything about Valya's room; she dropped to her knees and picked up the scraps of paper.

"Stop it," said Dusya vexedly. "We'll sweep it up. Let's go in the kitchen first, though: we'll be needed for the cooking."

Yasha and the humiliating scene in the park—all that had slipped from Tonya's memory in the happy open-hearted company of Dusya and Valya. She tidied the table-cloth and followed Dusya into the kitchen. Four families shared it, each with a kitchen-table of its own. That day, however, Valya had the run of the place: her neighbours were delighted to help and lent her pots and pans and glasses.

As they cooked, the three young mothers talked about their children.

"Aren't you tired of working in the crèche?" Dusya asked. "Not thinking of coming back to the shop?"

"Why on earth should I?" Antonina shrugged. "I'm never going to give up working with babies. I'm taking a nurses' training course now, and later I want to learn to be a children's doctor, one who looks after the very young ones. You can't imagine how interesting that work is. A baby can't tell you what's wrong with it or where the pain is; it's up to you to find that out."

"Wouldn't catch me touching the little brats," said Dusya. "I was afraid to pick Mitya up for the first year. Mum looked after him all the time."

"You're lucky. You've got a mother. There are some who haven't."

A momentary hush fell on the kitchen: neither Antonina nor Valya could call on a mother's help; they had lost their mothers in childhood.

Dusya, sensing their sadness, set about chopping the cabbage so vigorously that bits of it flew all over the kitchen.

"Look out, Dusya," said Valya. "You'll break something if you're not careful."

The light was beginning to fade when Antonina and Dusya left the house. They would have to hurry if they were to get home, wash, do their hair and change into party frocks for the evening. Antonina wanted to ask Dusya what dress she was going to wear but felt too shy. Dusya had so many things; she and Vasya earned good money; there was no keeping up with them.

She decided to wear her black skirt with a white blouse and a blue bow at the neck. Evening shoes she would borrow from Zoya—it was her night to be on duty so she wouldn't need them. Antonina resolved to have a good time.

If only she could forget Yasha once and for all, forget the way he had stretched his hand out to grip her ankle, forget the way he'd said "little swallow." If only she could be happy, calm, confident in herself like Dusya Syurtukova. If it had been Dusya she'd have forgotten Yasha all right. She wouldn't have felt any pity for him; she'd have walked on and nothing more.

Antonina wanted to find out whether she could walk past Yasha herself now. She went through the park again. But now there was no one lying on the path. Yasha must have recovered and gone home. Home, where, probably, his wife was crying as she sponged the blood off his face, changed his clothes and helped him to bed. Not much fun having a husband like that!

It was silly of her to be frightened. What had made her run away from him as though she were crazy?

Antonina felt better; again that ditty came back into her head. She wondered if in the wide world there existed a young man who could love her. Of course there must be one. And of course she would fall in love with him. She was only nineteen, she had all her life before her and one fine day she would be walking out in this park on a fellow's arm. But where was she going to meet that fellow? And when?

Antonina reached the crèche in no time. At the gate stood a stranger who was gazing up and down the road. For some reason he seemed delighted to see Antonina and smiled as he opened the gate for her. Antonina looked at the young man with surprise but he stepped aside without a word.

Who could it be? Why had he smiled so happily? Could she have been mistaken, but, really, he. . . . Maybe. . . .

She walked on slowly, stopped, glanced aside. Then she looked right round: the man was still standing at the gate watching her. But he was no longer smiling: he looked impatient, querulous.

The spark of joy that had suddenly been kindled in her heart died; Antonina stepped firmly on to the porch, rubbed her shoes hard on the mat and went to her room in the nurses' hostel. It was quiet inside; none of the nurses who had been on day-shift were resting, and the four white beds stood unruffled and austere. Antonina dragged her suitcase from under her bed, took out the skirt and blouse, found a blue bow at the bottom of everything but put it away again. What was the use of it? Who had she to make herself pretty for?

She would have to plug in the iron and do something about that blouse, though; but when she saw what time it was, she decided to feed Igor and Marusya Ryabova first. She was feeding Marusya as well as her own baby because the little girl's mother was ill and couldn't nurse her herself. She slipped into a white gown and covered her head, then walked along a short corridor to the crèche. The babies' feeding-time was near and from the nursery came insistent yells; the nurses were changing the babies before they kept their appointments with their mothers.

"Oh, there you are, Tonya darling, I've been waiting and waiting for you," called Zoya, dashing into the corridor. "Do a switch with me tonight, there's a dear. I've a ticket for the cinema and Vitali's been waiting for me such a long time. I told him I'd leave as soon as you came back."

So that was why the fellow was waiting at the gate. Even Zoya with her lisp and that complexion of hers had her admirer; and she was so certain that Antonina would stand in for her that evening, she'd already got one arm out of the sleeve of her hospital gown.

"I'd planned to go out myself tonight," said Antonina, watching Zoya struggle with a knot. "Valya Nazarenko's giving a house-warming party. I was going to ask you to lend me your evening shoes."

Zoya went on fumbling with the tapes at her cuff but now she was relying them. She said nothing, just sighed; she realized it was useless to argue—not decent, either, for Tonya was always willing to switch with anybody who asked.

"You can have the shoes," she whispered. "They're in my locker."

Zoya sounded utterly resigned to her fate. She'd have to go and tell Vitali she couldn't get off. He'd find somebody else to go with; the ticket wouldn't be wasted. There were plenty of other girls. . . .

Zoya pictured those unknown girls—gay and rosy-checked they skipped and laughed before her, their eyes sparkling, their pearly teeth gleaming, their ear-rings jingling.

"Tonya," she implored. "Please do it for me, just this last time. I'll stand in for you a whole month afterwards."

Her eyes were full of entreaty as she looked up at Antonina over her sleeve. The tape parted and under the hospital gown Antonina saw the cuff of Zoya's best pink blouse. She looked from the cuff to the carefully curled hair peeping from under Zoya's regulation cap, to the bead necklace, to the dabs of powder on her cheeks. For an instant she saw the smile of the young man who was waiting at the gate.

"All right," she said curtly. "Go to your cinema. I'll stay in."

Antonina turned her back, deaf to Zoya's delighted lisps, and hurried into the ward. The babies greeted her arrival with a concerted howl.

"So here you are at last," growled an old nurse, wrapping one of the babies on the table. "They're quite wild today; no holding 'em. Take your choice, they're both hungry."

Antonina picked up the doll-like baby with its red face and its screaming mouth, and began to suckle it. There was only one other woman in the room but Antonina could hear mothers arriving and taking off their coats in the cloak-room next door. She sat in a corner, one foot resting on a low stool, and pressed the child to her breast. "Come on, Marusya, don't waste time. Igor's hungry too. Can't you hear him crying while I'm feeding you?"

The mothers filed in, each wearing a white gown; the walk in the cold wind had brightened their cheeks. The screaming babies were carried in, given the breast and at once fell silent. The room was warm and still; a table-lamp with a blue glass shade cast a soft light; the nurse on duty came up quietly to each mother in turn and enquired in a whisper how her baby was feeding.

Antonina carried the replete, sleepy Marusya back to the nursery and picked up Igor. He smacked his lips with relish and drawing his hands from under the wrappings smote his mother's breast.

"Come, my pet, my son," whispered Antonina as she bent over the child. "You are all I have in the world, my joy, my sorrow, my bitter memories, my consolation. . . ."

She pressed her lips against the warm downy crown of the infant's head, and she imagined Valya's room full of guests, and the festive table with the empty place which was meant for her.

It had grown quite dark outside and through the well-polished window panes she could see the evening star. She would have sat on there much longer had not the nurse poked an angry face round the door and said:

"Are you going to feed him for a whole week, or what? Come on, it's time we went and cleared up."

2

In September Varya Stoletova left Verkhnyaya Kamenka. Ivan Konstantinovich and the twins stayed behind with Stepan—the old man, as he said, "for ever," the boys until the winter holidays. Ivan Konstantinovich asked Varya to be certain to send him his winter clothes.

"And don't forget my felt boots," he said. "I'll need my fur cap and the woollen mittens and socks; the quilted blanket too. And all the warm clothes for the children you can find."

After Varya's departure life became less eventful, though no one could complain of it being dull: the little boys were packed off to school every morning, Ivan Konstantinovich coached young workers from the factory and Stoletov spent the whole day at work. All four of them would leave home together and Stoletov always saw the children as far as the school doors.

He had just parted with them at the entrance to the school one morning, watched them climb up the steps to the porch and was on his way to the factory. The morning was sunny but there was a nip in the air. On the shady side of the street the ice was too hard to break underfoot but on the sunny side it was beginning to melt as in spring. Stoletov crossed over into the sun, shortened his stride and strolled on, deep in thought; suddenly a shower of leaves descended on him; a poplar which had been caught by the frost during the night had shed the remainder of its foliage as the sun warmed it up.

Stoletov sprang aside and looked round to see whether anyone had noticed that mighty leap. He brushed the leaves off his head and shoulders. It was then that he saw the instructor from the regional Party committee get out of a car near the factory gates and walk towards him.

"Quite a jump," the instructor sang out gaily. "I thought you'd seen a bear."

"Why shouldn't I jump?" Stoletov sounded angry. "I got the whole lot on the back of my neck." The instructor's jesting tone seemed untimely, mocking. Anyway, what was he doing there so early in the morning? Probably come to follow up some more tittle-tattle.

Since Chumov's dismissal, officials from the regional committee had paid the factory several visits in connection with statements he had made—statements which were directed against Stoletov, Budanov, the secretaries of the shop Party organizations and people who had absolutely nothing to do with running the factory.

Recently, however, these investigations had ceased: Chumov's statements were no longer given credence at regional headquarters. So Chumov tried another line: he stopped signing his denunciations with his name and, knowing that they would not be read if they were anonymous, put faked signatures to them, usually of men supposed to be in the services. Some of these letters, which purported to be from old acquaintances of Communists working at the factory and which contained all kinds of "revelations" about their past, were taken seriously, replies being sent to the fictitious addresses. Later, though, when the "sergeant" or the "seaman" was discovered to be none other than Chumov such denunciations were ignored.

Yet for some reason—perhaps because of the instructor's jocular manner—Stoletov imagined that his appearance must forebode something unpleasant. He shook hands with him brusquely, brushed the rest of the leaves off his coat and looked at the instructor quizzically. What's brought you here, my friend, that look asked; you look so sweet, you must have some bitter pill to administer.

The instructor, however, was in no hurry to come to the point; he launched into a discussion about the strange natural phenomenon of the poplar shedding its foliage so suddenly.

"And, mark my word, you'll not find another tree that does the same. None, except our Urals poplar. That's a phenomenon that you only find here in the Urals."

He spoke with pride in his voice. Was such a "phenomenon" really something to be so proud of, wondered Stoletov?

Stoletov showed the instructor into his office; to his surprise, he found Budanov sitting at his desk. The factory manager was on the telephone.

"Oh, here he is," Budanov said into the receiver. "Good-bye."

He got up and told Stoletov that he had been trying to get in touch with him for the past half-hour. There had been a call from the Ministry saying that Stoletov and Kovalev were to go to Moscow for a conference.

"I've sent someone to the airport for your tickets. Kovalev knows. I couldn't get hold of you anywhere. I wonder what it's all about."

"It's in connection with Korolev's article," said the instructor. "And you needn't bother about the tickets. I've got them in my pocket. We heard they were being sent for late last night but I didn't want to disturb you by ringing up so late, and decided to come over in the morning. There's an afternoon plane so there's plenty of time. Ring up the airport, though, and cancel your message."

He took the tickets out of his pocket and handed them to Stoletov.

"Haven't they asked for Korolev?" asked Stoletov. "That's a shame. He was a member of the commission, he knows the whole affair and, after

all, it was his article that set the ball rolling. One way or another we must get him to Moscow," he turned to Budanov. "Send him up on factory business and we'll get him into the conference all right."

How strange and unexpected it all was! The day had begun like any other with its routine jobs; none of them had any special plans to travel; and yet here they were, the three of them, waiting for the plane and talking about Moscow. They didn't even know what the trip held in store for them: approval of the "shrew" or the decision that it was unsatisfactory.

While waiting, Stoletov suggested a visit to the restaurant. They decided to have a late lunch. But the food was tasteless, the *hors-d'œuvres* uninviting, the beer flat. Why on earth the people who ran the restaurant in this fine, attractive airport building should pay so little attention to the requirements of travellers waiting for a plane, or making a brief stop between long spells of flying—that was something Stoletov could not understand.

Neither Andrei nor Kovalev worried about the restaurant's shortcomings, however. Kovalev, engrossed in his own thoughts, drank the beer and ate the uninviting food without noticing what he was offered; Andrei was excited at the prospect of seeing his father again, of being back in Moscow and of meeting his friends at the newspaper office which he was determined to visit. Yes, thought Stoletov as he watched Andrei, there was no doubt that he was glad to be going to Moscow: he'd been looking out-of-sorts recently. . . .

"You're looking a bit peaky," Stoletov said to him. "Lost weight. Lines under your eyes. That's not the way you ought to let your father see you. Not in form."

In form! Would anybody be in form after what he'd been through. Stoletov must know all about it. And of course he'd taken him along with them to Moscow to distract him and console him, and not at all because he considered that the author of the article about the Kovalev invention should be there.

Andrei stole a glance at Stoletov. Surely he wasn't going to offer him his sympathy? But Stoletov was looking elsewhere now: he was settling the bill and reproaching the waitress for the tasteless meal she had brought them.

"I'm sure you'd be ashamed to offer visitors a meal like that in your own house," he said. "Yet here you do it. That's inhospitable, you know; and it doesn't reflect well on you, either."

"We serve what's given to us at the counter," the waitress replied as she counted out the change. "At home I can choose because I do my own cooking but here we're just serving the stuff."

"You ought to refuse to take it if it's not tasty. You ought to protest and kick up a row. Here I come for a meal; what do I know about the cook or the girl behind the counter who hands you the food? I have to deal with you. And I'm sure you don't like it when a customer leaves as hungry as when he came in. In your place I'd feel downright ashamed of myself."

The girl listened in silence, then went away with the untouched food.

"What's the use?" said Kovalev. "Her being ashamed won't help you much, would it?"

"What's the use, you ask? See what's happening?" Stoletov said triumphantly. "She's bringing the manager."

The waitress returned to the table with a lanky character in a dark suit and a dingy shirt. He looked worn out and limp as he ambled towards them, holding the palm of his hand to his cheek.

"These are the customers who complained," said the waitress, stopping at their table and indicating Stoletov. "They hardly touched the food. Sent it all back."

The manager's face contorted with pain; what could he do if the suppliers treated him so badly?

"You could have a tinned crab salad instead of the fish," he suggested. "And an omelette, perhaps?"

"We don't want your salad," said Stoletov. "We'll bear up till Moscow and have supper there. The suppliers indeed! It's not their fault. What's wrong is your indifference to passengers' needs."

The manager winced still harder and pressed his hand to his cheek. He obviously had tooth-ache. What did this disgruntled passenger want of him? The plane would soon be in and then he'd be off. And he'd probably never come into the place again for a meal. People rarely came twice; they arrived, they left with their complaints and their demands. Suppose he were to go and see his suppliers tomorrow to try and get some better stuff out of them. Well, this passenger would have left long before and all his efforts would be unappreciated.

Some mechanics came out of the office, a young woman in uniform hurried through the restaurant, and over the loud-speaker came a woman's voice inviting the passengers to go out on to the tarmac.

"Come along," said Stoletov and rose to his feet.

As they took off, Stoletov stole a glance at Andrei. A pity a decent chap like that should be feeling so cut up about the way Lyuba Zvonaryeva had treated him. You can't yank out pain and resentment like a rotten tooth! Only time can help.

But time hadn't helped much in the case of Kovalev, had it? There he sat, eyes shut, head down, taciturn and closed up. It needed more than a change of scene to drive away his sorrow.

What was worse, Stoletov wondered: to lose completely someone dear to you as Yelena Protasova had lost her husband or to know that that person is alive and well, happy even, but become a stranger to you, a stranger for ever? The loss that Protasova had suffered was irreparable. . . . No one had taken the place of her husband in her life, no one ever would, but she had not allowed herself to brood over her grief and had never hidden it from others. And as a result she found life easier than Kovalev who was incapable of telling anybody what had happened to him. He could not talk about the past, about the time when he and the woman he loved were together, because that past was spoiled, blighted. He did not believe in the past, he cursed himself for his trustfulness, he did not know exactly when that trustfulness had become ridiculous, his love unheeded, his presence burdensome.

"Going to sleep, Arseni Mikhailovich?"

"No," Kovalev replied. "I can't sleep sitting up."

"That's one of the things I learned to do during the war, to sleep sitting or even standing. There were times when I seemed to fall off to sleep on the march; I'd go on and on and then suddenly come to with a

jerk, I'd begin to sway and stumble and lose all idea where I was. I don't suppose that would happen to me now."

"I wasn't in the army," said Kovalev. "I was stuck back in the rear, working in a factory. There'd be times when I had to sleep in the shop but I'd always have to lie down on a bench in my office. Hello, we seem to be losing height. Where've we got to?"

"Kazan, I expect," said Andrei, looking out and seeing scattered lights ahead....

Andrei walked up and down the tarmac as crates were unloaded. He felt impatient to be in the air again. He wanted to be in Moscow before midnight, to run up the familiar staircase to the third floor, to press the yellow bell and listen with his ear against the door to the approaching footsteps. Whose would they be? If they were short and light it would be Maria Mikhailovna. Dragging and slow—that would be the old lady who lived down the corridor. But if the steps were firm and unhurried they would be his father's. Andrei hoped his father would open the door to him, that he would have a presentiment that it was his son ringing, that he would be the first to see Andrei back.

Moscow at last! A comfortable room in a hotel; the chambermaid silently moving to and fro; quietness in the passage; the well-known street scene through the window. Stoletov was using the telephone; Kovalev was washing in the white-tiled bathroom, and Andrei sat on the edge of a soft chair upholstered in pink satin, waiting until he could conveniently leave for home.

They had driven straight from the airport to the hotel which was to be their headquarters. Andrei, however, did not feel like resting after the flight; he wanted to get home, to the street where he knew every stone, where one of those stones had the name A. Korolev scratched on it with a nail, and where that high wooden fence stood behind which stretched the wide yard of an old three-storey house, with wooden sheds in it, a volley-ball court and a bench under a tree.

What a long time Stoletov was on that phone.

"The conference is at eleven tomorrow morning," he announced at last as he replaced the receiver. "You're free till ten o'clock."

At last Andrei was in that street, close to that house. The gate opened with its usual creak, the yard smelled just the same.

There was a light on in the room with the white casement curtains. That was their room. The one next to it with the net curtains drawn was where Nikolai's mother lived. But how small and old everything looked. The yard which used to seem so spacious looked quite cramped, with its shabby low-roofed outhouses jostling each other. And the tree was not at all high; the staircase was narrow, the steps worn down, the yellow bell-push lay deep in the rustling brass frame nailed on a door that had become quite black with age.

"Open the door. It's me, Andrei!"

"Andryusha!" A small grey-haired woman threw her arms round his neck. "Where have you come from? My dear boy."

A door banged; firm, well-known footsteps sounded at the end of the passage; Andrei held his breath.

"Dad!"

Everything else slipped out of sight; he saw only the tall, grey-headed, infinitely dear man who was walking towards him....

That night flew by. Lights burned till dawn in every room of that third-floor flat, in the kitchen, in the passage. Andrei and his father sat at the table; Maria Mikhailovna kept popping in and out. Even the old lady who lived down the passage did not go to bed but kept fussing in the kitchen, more hindrance than help to Maria Mikhailovna. Kettles and saucepans steamed on the gas stove, a *pirog* baked in the oven, and on



the sofa, fresh clean sheets waited impatiently for Andrei. The son of the house had returned. A beloved guest, unexpected but oh, so welcome!

"So that article of yours had some effect?" Andrei's father asked him with a gratified smile. "On the government, too! That's no laughing matter. You must bring that inventor round to see us. I'll show him over the factory."

Andrei did not risk disappointing his father by telling him that Kovalev would not find anything to admire in the old small factory where his father worked.

"If we're kept for a few days in Moscow I'll bring him round for sure," he replied. "Even if he hasn't time to see the factory he'll be able to meet you."

"Tell me, Andrei, is Nik getting on all right with Nina?" asked Maria Mikhailovna. "She strikes me as being a bit bossy and Nikolai's so quiet, you know."

"Quiet! Oh, you don't know him. He gave our prize rowdy such a clout that I don't suppose he's forgotten it yet.... Yes, they're getting on all right. The only trouble is they haven't a room."

"That's because of you," said Andrei's father. "Nikolai wants all three of you to live together. That's why they're waiting till there's a flat available. I don't understand; can't you really live on your own?"

"Me? What's it got to do with me?"

Andrei looked from his father to Maria Mikhailovna. He didn't understand. Maria Mikhailovna was frowning. So his old man must have given away some secret. But Andrei heard his father continue as he stroked his moustache: "Well, even if it's not because of you, let them have your room. You'll find somewhere to live; it's never hard for one. Those two are fretting something terrible."

A late-autumn dawn was breaking over Moscow when the lights in that third-floor flat began to go out. The first was in the old lady's room, then the kitchen light went out, then the one in Maria Mikhailovna's room. The Korolevs' was the last. Andrei slept on the sofa where he had slept as child, schoolboy, student. His father lay still in bed thinking the thoughts of a father. So his son's wings had not been clipped. Indeed they seemed to have grown, their sweep seemed to have become broader, more powerful. But after all, that was what you would expect.

The dawn crept into the room through the white curtains. The alarm-clock had been set for nine o'clock. Andrei's father did not need it himself; he would wake without it—wake and get up and go to the factory where he would tell his mates about the unexpected visitor—flown he had, too, with important work to do. A pity, of course, that he hadn't come for long, but he couldn't complain—work is work.

3

During one of the conferences at the Ministry, Andrei saw Zhukov. They were all sitting round the table. Zhukov came in late, tossed his brief-case down casually and, choosing a place slightly apart from the others, sat lolling in his chair. He still had that self-confident, rather arrogant bearing, was as well dressed as ever, but Andrei noticed that his cheeks were hollow, that he seemed to have aged, and that the casualness did not ring true.

Catching Andrei's eye, Zhukov smiled and waved a hand. Then he took a newspaper out of his pocket, ran his eyes over the front page and began to follow the proceedings of the conference. Things were being said that to Nikolai Mikhailovich Zhukov made far from pleasant listening but he raised no objections, just sat there, silent and seemingly indifferent.

After the conference he waved once more to Andrei and edged his way towards him through the people leaving their places at the table. But Andrei played the coward: taking advantage of the fact that he was standing near the door, and pretending that he had not noticed Zhukov coming towards him, he slipped out of the room.

However, the two did meet: that evening Zhukov called on Andrei at home. It was late when he came; Andrei and his father had had supper and were thinking of going to bed. Zhukov said he would not stay for more than a few minutes but sat down and showed no signs of being in a hurry to leave.

From close to, Andrei could see more clearly than before the change in Zhukov's appearance. It was not only that the man had lost weight and that his face was distinctly more lined, but that in every gesture, smile and expression there was a guilty, ingratiating note where before there had been the self-confidence of a man used to giving orders.

Zhukov made an effort to behave in his old way: he gave Andrei a patronizing pat on the shoulder; he played his old trick of kissing Maria Mikhailovna's hand with mock politeness; and when he shook hands with Andrei's father he gave his arm a great swing and brought the palm of his hand smack against the other's. But Andrei felt that none of these familiar gestures corresponded to Zhukov's real mood. There was something forced, too, in the questions he asked about how they all were, what news they had, how Nikolai was getting on at work. . . .

The only time his voice expressed genuine interest was when he asked Andrei whether he and Nikolai were as great friends as ever. The question was an ambiguous one: it could have meant whether their friendship has survived Nikolai's marriage or whether Andrei's article had driven a wedge between them. Andrei felt it was the latter Zhukov had in mind.

Zhukov went on enquiring about his son, about Nina; but Andrei knew he was interested in something quite different. The conversation flagged; Andrei's replies became terse and grudging and Zhukov was clearly at a loss to know how to go on.

"So we can take it that our newly-weds are happy together," he said for the third time. "Ah well, they're enjoying their honeymoon. An idyllic time."

Maria Mikhailovna, who had been watching her ex-husband all the time with a severe, slightly contemptuous expression, sighed heavily and looked away. Although she did not speak, Andrei realized that she found the entire conversation unpleasant and was impatiently waiting for it to end.

"You've to be up early tomorrow, Maria Mikhailovna," said Andrei. "Why don't you go to bed and leave the clearing up to me?"

He nodded towards the table where the tea stood untouched in the glasses; and Maria Mikhailovna took the hint gladly and rose to her feet.

"I'll go to bed, if you'll excuse me," she said drily. "Good night."

It was clear to Andrei that Zhukov was in very low spirits. He had not been demoted or reprimanded in any way; but those whose opinions he valued and on whom his position depended were now speaking about him with indignation and contempt as of one who has been detected in an unworthy, base act.

And that, Andrei felt, must be worse than any administrative reprimand. Had Zhukov been discharged he would have considered himself victimized, would no doubt have found people to be sorry for him, people who would consider that he had been treated too harshly, unfairly, even. But whom could he fight against now? And how could he do it?

Andrei understood Zhukov's situation and, although he was delighted that the Kovalev machine had at last been valued at its true worth and accepted, nevertheless he felt a little sorry for Zhukov. But how he wished the man would go. He had no desire to talk about that article; he shunned explanations, knowing that they could add nothing new.

But Zhukov, apparently, wanted an explanation. He would not leave, he sat on sipping his cold tea and glancing meaningfully at Andrei's father in the hope that he, too, would go off to bed and leave Andrei and him to have a talk on their own. Then he realized that there was nowhere for Boris Ivanovich to go; there was just this one room in which they were all sitting.

"D'you mind seeing me on my way a little?" said Zhukov, pushing his glass aside. "A stroll before turning in's always good for you."

Out in the street an autumn wind was blowing and from the dark overcast sky came a spatter of rain and sleet. Andrei turned at once in the direction of the trolley-bus stop but Zhukov grasped his arm and said he preferred to walk to the taxi stand.

"I have to change if I take the trolley-bus," he said. "A taxi suits my old bones better."

He leaned more heavily on Andrei's arm as if to convey a hint that he needed the young man's help and support; then he launched on the very subject that Andrei wanted to avoid.

"That was a serious bit of work, that article of yours," Zhukov began with a wry smile. "You got your technical facts right. One might think you'd studied at a technical college instead of the philology faculty. Well done, you've learned how to handle special questions. Did you consult Stoletov or Kovalev himself?"

"I wrote the article on my own," said Andrei. He was surprised to find how much asperity had come into his voice. "There were no particularly complicated technical questions involved. . . . I used the material of the countless commissions that tested the machine."

He felt like adding that some of the material he had made use of originated from Zhukov himself. It was Zhukov, however, who raised this point.

"Oh, there's plenty of material, I admit. You must have noticed that I was one of the first to point out the merits of the Kovalev machine. I signed the document that recommended its adoption. It wasn't in any way my fault that no decision was taken then to produce the machine."

Andrei did not reply; he suppressed a desire to remind Zhukov that his signature stood under a decision of a totally opposite nature.

"Now the decision's been taken," he said, hoping thus to close a conversation he found so distasteful. "The story of the Kovalev invention has ended happily."

"Ended? D'you think so?" said Zhukov wryly. "For Kovalev maybe, but for very many others that story will have a sequel."

Breathing heavily, he leaned still more on Andrei and his voice became smooth and confidential: "Now look here, you wrote an article, a fine passionate article defending a useful invention. Your article appeared at a propitious moment, it fitted in with the ideas of those who are in charge of the Ministry just now; it was brought to their notice; they approved of it. But don't imagine that if all that material had been published earlier, Kovalev would not have had to go through all those worries and trials. Don't be so simple-minded as to think that, my friend. I wouldn't like you to get such ideas in that clever young head of yours."

Zhukov began to walk more slowly; they were approaching the taxi rank where a long line of cabs were waiting. But Andrei's attempt to head his companion towards a taxi was vain; Zhukov's suede-gloved hand tightened on Andrei's elbow and led him on.

In a sad and unfamiliar voice Zhukov explained what the situation had been at head office—with people afraid of taking the initiative, always playing safe; he told Andrei how sceptical his chiefs and their supporters among certain leading officials in the Ministry were towards any work

that originated outside and not in the designing office of the main organization.

"On the one hand we had suggestions from professors, well-known established scientists, and on the other those of engineers, technologists, and simple workers living far from Moscow, quite cut off from the institutions where problems of the latest technique were being worked on. Whose suggestion would you have given first consideration to? Which would you have preferred?"

"I'd have looked at all of them," said Andrei. "And I'd have preferred the best."

"The best! D'you think it's so easy to tell which is the best? Your attitude, if you'll excuse my saying so, is somewhat crude, Andrei. It's a very difficult business deciding which is the best. For that, you need time and practical tests—and that means spending a great deal of state money. The man who's responsible for allocating that money prefers not to risk tens of thousands of roubles but to take a design which has been done by somebody with a name, somebody who's an authority in science. . . . I know it's very easy to criticize, but it's hard to work any other way. That happens wherever you look, Andrei; you'd act the same way yourself. Say, for instance, that as editor you received two poems: one by a famous poet and the other by a workman—you'd print the one by the famous poet. And you'd be proud to have his name in your paper."

"I'd publish what I thought to be the better of the two," said Andrei. "It's not the name I'd be proud to print, but the poem."

"Well, perhaps that's what you would do," Zhukov assented hurriedly. "But, my dear fellow, judging from the poems I read in the papers and magazines I feel pretty certain that other editors are not always as conscientious as you. I always read those poems—I like poetry—and I can tell that quite often the name of the author is the only thing that got it into print. I'm not blaming the editors, mind you. They're human, after all."

"What you're saying, then, is that the only merit of the design you pushed instead of Kovalev's was the names of its designers? Am I right?"

The question was a blunt one: had Zhukov forgotten that his own name was in the list of authors of the design? Why had he started this whole conversation when it was now quite clear that the attempts to kill Kovalev's machine were prompted by base interests? The plan to produce it had been shelved, because certain people wanted to push their own work. And the names appended to the design of the Kurzhen were not so well known, either. . . .

The victor's indulgence towards the vanquished left Andrei at once: the vanquished, it appeared, did not understand the vileness of his behaviour.

"Wasn't your name among those of the designers of the Kurzhen?" said Andrei, freeing his arm from Zhukov's grasp. "I know it was. Then why did you take on the miserable job of shelving the Kovalev design? It doesn't seem to me quite correct that you should have been a member of the jury in a competition your own work was entered for."

"Are you suggesting that I shelved the Kovalev design to get some personal advantage out of it?" said Zhukov quickly. "Oh no, my friend, that won't work. I got only a mere flea-bite out of the Kurzhen."

Zhukov's voice had lost its smooth confidential tone and the smile had gone from his lips.

"As a result of that little piece of yours in the paper, I, an experienced engineer, a respected worker without a blot on my character, have been accused of pulling strings for my own advantage. Young fellows like you have been trying to make that out. I showed how baseless those charges were—with documentary proof, not just empty declarations. I was not going to let anyone smear my reputation. And I'm not going to let anyone do it now, I'll see that whoever tries to do so answers for it."

"I don't know who's been accusing you or what they've been accusing you of," said Andrei, controlling himself with difficulty. "I only charged you with one thing, and I stick to it: with not wanting to help a man who'd invented something the country needed. As for your motives—that's another question."

"But it's a question you've got an answer to in your mind," said Zhukov, alarm and concern fleeting across his face. "And not only you. You and Kovalev and that mighty champion of his, Stoletov, are up in Moscow together and you'll certainly answer that question before many commissions."

"I don't know whether we shall or not. I expect the members of those commissions know the answer already."

Andrei swung away from Zhukov and waved at a taxi that was passing by. The driver braked, drew the car up a few metres farther on, opened the door and leaned out of his seat looking out.

"Take this taxi," said Andrei, striding to the cab. "It's time I was getting back. Good night, Nikolai Mikhailovich."

Turning abruptly, Andrei walked off, not even waiting to see whether Zhukov took the taxi or not. He was in a hurry to get away from a man who had come to explain things not at all because he felt in the wrong but because he was afraid of something and wanted to forestall the danger. Andrei wanted to get back home as soon as possible. It was shameful that he had wasted a whole evening that he might have spent with his father. Now it was late; the yard was quite dark; his father would have gone to bed.

Andrei hurried. There was still a light burning in their room. A shadow moved on the curtain and disappeared.

"Here you are at last," he heard his father say as he ran up the stairs. "Out strolling with him for so long, you'd think he was a young lady. It doesn't leave us any time for a good talk."

Andrei's father stood on the landing, frowning at his tall, grown-up son. Just look at the size of him. But he came up the stairs like he'd done as a schoolboy—three steps at a time without holding on to the bannisters, and sliding on the smooth flags of the landing as if they were ice.

"Did you see him home?" asked Boris Ivanovich, closing the door behind Andrei.

"No, I shoved him into a taxi. But before that I had to listen to all sorts of explanations."

Boris Ivanovich gave an understanding nod: it wasn't for nothing that an important old bird like Zhukov came to his house. That article of Andrei's had touched him in a sore place. One didn't have to look twice at him to see that.

"Well, did he calm down after your explanations? Or did he still have the fidgets like he did here?"

"He was a bit fidgety at first, then he started moaning for sympathy but in the end he lost his temper. Oh, let's forget him. I'm sorry for Nikolai, though—it's rotten luck to have a father like that."

4

There was nothing to keep them in Moscow any longer. Stoletov, returning that evening to his hotel, looked through his notebooks and marvelled at the amount of work they had got through. True, the questions had been settled without fuss, there had been few obstacles to surmount; some firm, just hand had removed those obstacles without their aid. All the same, they had sat in at many conferences, taken the advice of various experts, consulted the scientific research institute which had previously rejected the "shrew" flatly but which now not only recognized its merits but found that with a slight modification of the design it could be used for yet another function or two.

Besides matters directly connected with the machine and interesting to Stoletov as an engineer there were matters of a quite different nature—an impartial analysis had to be made of the reasons why Kovalev had been given so much trouble. The results of this analysis fully confirmed the opinions expressed in Andrei's article.

As he packed, Stoletov glanced once more at his notebook to make sure that everything had been done, closed his suitcase, and impressed on Andrei the importance of being at the station the following morning in good time for the train—not two or three minutes before it was due out: he didn't want any unnecessary worry.

"I'm a provincial," he said. "I'm not used to little tricks like turning up after the whistle's gone. I like to arrive in good time to visit the refreshment room, say good-bye to the people who've come to see me off, and settle down in my compartment."

Andrei promised not to be late and left; he planned to see a play that evening. Stoletov and Kovalev remained in the hotel room. They were in no hurry; they had a good supper in the restaurant, sat listening to the orchestra for a while and then went for a stroll. It was still fairly early—just before the theatres opened—and the people in the streets were hurrying along as if each of them was on his way to a play or a concert.

"A pity we didn't get tickets for something," complained Stoletov. "I felt quite envious of Andrei when he said he was going to the Art Theatre."

"I'd like to take you to a certain flat," Kovalev said abruptly. "It's only a few minutes' walk from here. I don't think we'll stay there long. Please come and do me the favour not to ask why I'm taking you there."

Kovalev's voice held a strange note. He sounded moved, uneasy; Stoletov went with him and asked no questions. Silently the two men climbed a staircase and entered a flat where they were met by a woman whom Stoletov did not know though her face seemed vaguely familiar.

On opening the door, the woman uttered a startled cry and dashed out of sight. "Go into the dining-room," she called from another room. "I'll join you in a moment."

Kovalev shrugged, smiled wryly and led the way down a narrow passage, choked with suitcases, bookshelves, packing cases. It was clear that all these things had once been in the rooms and had been pushed out because no one was using them now.

The small dining-room was brightly lit by an unshaded lamp that hung bleakly from the ceiling. The table below it was a fine piece of antique furniture like all the rest in the room—the bucket-backed chairs, the uncomfortably hard sofa, the sideboard with the painted china on glass-fronted shelves. There were pictures on the wall—all portraits of the same woman.

"Her first husband was an artist," said Kovalev, noticing Stoletov's interest in the pictures. "Then I came. Now there's a doctor. There may have been others. I don't know."

Stoletov detected scorn and with it self-pity in Kovalev's voice. So that was where Kovalev had brought him. But why did he have to do it?

"D'you think they are a good likeness?" the woman asked. "Probably not. I've grown old, haven't I?"

There was archness in the question—it obviously invited a denial. But Stoletov replied: "Yes, you've changed a great deal."

Although at first sight the woman looked almost boyishly young with her short hair, exaggeratedly short skirt, jumper and low-heeled shoes, the bright lamp betrayed her lightly rouged cheeks, and an excessive application of mascara and lipstick. Glancing at the lamp, she went up to the table and pulled down a piece of newspaper which was tied round the flex. The room became darker and in this light that face became quite young.

"I'm Marina," she said, as she shook hands with Stoletov. "So you think I've aged a lot, do you?"

Not waiting for an answer she went to Kovalev, flung her arms round his neck and kissed him on the lips.

"Are you going to be in Moscow for long?" she asked him.

Kovalev said he was leaving Moscow very shortly. Then Marina began prattling about all sorts of nonsense, saying she had no lampshade because she simply couldn't get anything decent to match the new furniture, that her husband was in Leningrad on business and that her daughter had gone to the theatre with a friend.

As she talked, she wandered about the room putting plates and glasses on the table and pouring out some wine.

"Let's drink to the past," she said, holding her glass out to Kovalev. Then turning to Stoletov, "And with you I'll drink to the future."

Stoletov clinked glasses with her, sipped the dry wine and put his glass down, thinking that he would not care to share any part of his future with this woman. Everything about her was so unnatural, so unpleasant. He remembered the way she had looked when she opened the door to them. Then her face and her hair looked quite different and she wore a rather grubby house-dress instead of that jumper and skirt. She had changed her clothes, brushed her hair and made up her face just for the visitors; obviously when she was alone she was quite different. He watched her attentively, trying to fathom the reason for Kovalev's infatuation. Of course, she was attractive now that the light was dimmer. But remove that make-up and not much of the beauty would remain. Was she intelli-

gent? Probably not very; she would sit there smoking and talking about parties and the stage celebrities she knew. Was she perhaps warm-hearted, sensitive? Then why had she kissed her ex-husband, knowing that he was still in love with her and that she was making him suffer?

Stoletov felt angry and ill-disposed towards Marina. She was not at all to his taste. It was painful to see a fine intelligent man like Kovalev lose his wits whenever she looked at him, trembled at her touch, swallow glass after glass as he watched her lips.

And Marina knew what power she had over him. She knew it and for some reason of her own exercised it, moving quite close to Kovalev, brushing him with her shoulder, taking his glass and touching its edge with her lips. Why did she do that? The devil only knew. In any case it was horrible to see.

Stoletov decided to get up and go but did not want to leave Kovalev alone with the woman. Couldn't he see what trash she was? Everything about her was so false. She was lying now, pretending that Kovalev's presence moved her feelings, letting her hand, her glance rest on him. As if it meant anything at all to her.

"Why aren't you drinking?" Marina asked Stoletov.

"I don't like dry wine."

"Shall I send for some brandy?"

"No, don't bother. I don't feel like drinking at all."

"Don't be such a wet blanket. I'll cheer you up."

She went into the next room and returned with a guitar. She sat on the sofa, brushed the strings with her fingers and broke into a sentimental song. Where did that made-up hag get that bitter voice, so full of real anguish? Where had she learned that strange rambling melody so like an old Gypsy song? Had it a melody at all? Was it Marina singing or some lonely, embittered creature relating her unhappiness?

Stoletov did not see the painted lips, the over-short skirt, the pert looks. He only heard that voice, so full of longing and plaintive entreaty.

He stole a glance at Kovalev and it seemed to him that there were tears in Kovalev's eyes as he sat there, his head grasped between his hands. What memories did that song revive? Why had Marina chosen to sing it? She sang well, that had to be admitted, though she had no voice. The trick was done by some special intonation. She had forgotten entirely about her appearance—she sat in an ungainly pose crouched over the guitar, and failed to notice that now the light fell directly on her, showing her wrinkles and the make-up on her cheeks.

"What a sad song. Can't you sing something a bit jollier?" said Stoletov smiling coldly.

"I don't know any of that kind. I'll sing you an old, old Gypsy romance."

Please yourself, thought Stoletov. Anyway, he couldn't take Marina seriously. He felt sure that if need be she could sing music-hall songs and dance on the table despite those thick ankles which she flaunted so much. She wasn't at all the languid lily she tried to make herself out to be. When she was on her own, he was sure, she fussed about with silly little gestures. No, Marina would not catch him with her guitar and her songs. But poor old Kovalev had swallowed it all, hook, line and sinker.

"Don't you think it's time we got going, Arseni Mikhailovich?"

Ah, she didn't like that. She realized that he'd read her thoughts. All right, let her be mad if she wanted to be. He'd gladly have told her what he thought of her had he not felt sorry for a good fellow.

What a relief to be out in the street. A marvellous cool drizzle, a splendidly bracing wind, the pedestrians hurrying along the shiny wet pavements.

"That was a complete waste of time, Arseni Mikhailovich."

"Perhaps you're right. But I wanted you to know."

"If I were in your shoes I'd get your daughter out of her hands."

"She won't give her up. She needs the girl as a sort of shield. Anyway it's too late, the girl's fourteen, she's spoiled—like her mother. Let's not talk about it any more, Stepan Demyanovich."

"Very well, old man. . . ."

And so the subject was not referred to again, either in Moscow or on the return journey. . . .

5

The journey back took a long time—they travelled by rail. The fourth place in their sleeper was occupied by a young engineer whom the Ministry had sent to help with the construction of the "shrew." They were returning victorious and, consequently, their spirits were high. They played cards and sang a good deal.

Even Andrei cheered up a little, much to Stoletov's satisfaction. Andrei's article had been praised and he had been invited to write more. He had bought technical dictionaries and reference books for the *Tribuna* office and presents for his friends.

The "old lady who lived down the passage" had helped him with his shopping.

"You want presents for girls? Working-girls? All right, I'll come along with you, otherwise you might buy the wrong things."

She put on her best black serge coat and a dark knitted shawl and carried a bag with a brass clasp. Andrei took the old lady's arm and they set out for the Petrovka, the street where, she asserted, everything in the world that a girl might want could be found.

The most important present was the one for Polina. Andrei decided to buy her a pair of "costume jewellery" ear-rings—bronze clips in the shape of roses which shone like real gold—with a ring, brooch and bracelet to match.

"It's a pity they don't provide a case for them," said the old lady. "We'll have to look round and see what we can find at home—I've one lined in quilted silk."

The words were not wasted. The shop-assistant blushed and put the jewellery into a case.

"It hasn't silk lining but at least it's new, it'll look better than some old case."

"A good thing it is new," said the old lady tartly, "if I hadn't mentioned the old one, you'd have given us the jewellery in a paper bag."

For Polina's two assistants the old lady chose small bead bags. She found a pretty sewing basket for Valya Nazarenko and suggested Andrei

buy Vanya a tie. When she heard the printer was elderly and smoked, she proposed a cigarette-holder.

"Is that all?" she asked disappointedly as Andrei picked up the parcels. "Haven't you got a sweetheart? Look at that lovely silk shawl with the fringe. It's just the thing for a girl to throw over her shoulders when she goes for a stroll with her young man."

"I've nobody to give it to, I'm afraid."

"You don't say! A fine young man like you and you tell me you haven't found a girl that pleases you yet. If you like I'll tell your fortune with the cards when we get home. I'm good at telling fortunes. The other day I laid out the cards to find out what was going to happen you and they foretold a long journey. I said to your father: 'Boris Iva, ovich, you may expect to see your son; he's going to come here!' And your father just laughed and said: 'True, the lad's got a long journey ahead of him, he'll live long and go far, so the cards aren't far wrong.' Your father's always making fun of me, you know, but I'll tell your fortune properly with the Queen of Diamonds."

"Why the Queen of Diamonds?"

"Because she stands for a young lady. You don't want a widow, do you? That would mean Spades."

Andrei closed his suitcase. He had been showing Stoletov his purchases and Stoletov had approved. But what pleased him most were the presents Maria Mikhailovna was sending to Nina and Nikolai—a bright blue knitted cap with scarf and mittens to match for Nina and a soft warm sweater with a reindeer and a fir tree on the chest for Nikolai.

"Hm, that's just the sort I ought to have bought for my youngsters," said Stoletov. "The ones I got are terribly ordinary—plain grey."

Stoletov had bought for his wife a pretty blue cup with a floral pattern in gold. He did not show it to the others: the cup was packed at the bottom of his suitcase wrapped up carefully in a shirt. He meant to keep it safe till the winter holidays when Varya would return to Verkhnyaya Kamenka.

Then it occurred to him that he might deliver his present to Varya during the journey. The train stopped for forty minutes at the station, the house was not far away, he could take a taxi. He had the key to the flat in his pocket—all he had to do was to drive to the house, leave his present and dash back to the train.

His home town was only half-an-hour away. Should he risk it or not? Stoletov couldn't make up his mind.

In any case, he put on his hat and coat. He took the cup out of the suitcase as surreptitiously as possible. It went into his pocket easily enough though he had qualms about the handle being safe.

"I'm going into the corridor," he told Andrei. "Get a little fresh air there."

Andrei offered to accompany him but that wouldn't do at all. Stoletov mumbled something vague in reply and hurried to the end of the coach. There he slid open the connecting door and slipped on to the gangway that led to the next coach. He did not want his companions to see him. Can't a fellow have a bit of solitude if he feels like it?

Stoletov opened the door slightly: the train seemed to be slowing down. But it was still running pretty fast, whistling occasionally as if

announcing its arrival. Stoletov knew every inch of the line—each level-crossing, incline, rail-side building. . . .

They were there! Stoletov dashed through the subway, out on to the station square and made for the taxi rank.

"I want you to drive me to Mikhailovskaya Street and wait there for me and then drive me straight back here. Make it snappy, please."

The driver swung the taxi round skilfully, shot under the nose of a tram, took the hill fast and drew up at the entrance of the house. Stoletov sprinted upstairs, slipped the key into the lock, turned it and was home.

For an instant Stoletov stopped in the hall, recovering his breath and trying to discover whether anybody was in. The flat was silent. The only sound was the loud, portentous ticking of the clock on the wall. Stoletov wondered whether Varya wound it up herself. She had always made out she didn't know how to.

First, he looked into "their" room. Nothing had changed there: over his writing-desk hung an enlarged photograph of the first post-war excavator built at the factory and on the desk itself his books and folders and a collection of pencils in a silver mug—a birthday present from his grandfather. On the piano lay sheets of music and Varya's scarf and gloves. On a small table that Varya used were music notebooks containing what were probably the exercises of Varya's pupils, an old ink-pot with a brass top and some photographs in wooden frames. The photographs were an addition. Stoletov did not remember seeing any on the desk before.

He glanced at them. One was of himself, a war-time snapshot. He had forgotten about it; Varya must have dug it out of an old album. It showed him wearing a sheepskin and a cap with ear-flaps; his head was thrown back as he stood looking up at the sky with a broad smile on his face. He looked pretty silly in that picture. Why had Varya chosen just that one for her desk?

The other photograph was also of him but this time he was with the children. That, too, was a snapshot: Varya had taken it on the lake-side. The boys were in bathing shorts and held fishing-rods in their hands. They were obviously posing for the camera, looking straight at it and pretending they'd hooked something. Stoletov, in a short-sleeved singlet, was standing in profile and laughing. . . . What a lovely hot sunny day that had been! Varya had taken many pictures that day but, once again, this was far from the best.

On a small table near the divan which served Varya as a bed, Stoletov discovered yet more photographs—again of himself and of the children, and a small one of Ivan Konstantinovich. Lying beside them was a book, some sewing, a half-full cup of tea. So Varya, usually so punctual, must have overslept that morning and been in too much of a hurry to clear away the cup she always put beside her bed in case she woke up thirsty during the night.

Taking from his pocket the cup he had bought in Moscow, Stoletov went into the kitchen and rinsed it carefully. Then he went back into the room, poured the cold tea from the old cup into the new one and put the former away in the cupboard. He imagined how surprised Varya would be at the mysterious transformation act.

He took a quick glance into the boys' room and the tiny "cabin" where Ivan Konstantinovich used to live. That room was almost bare; the old man had taken nearly all his possessions with him. In the boys' room, last year's school time-table hung over the desk, last year's copy-books lay on the desk itself. Some small fish swam slowly in a tank on the window-sill.

Nothing had changed, yet the flat seemed deserted. The silence, too, was unusual; before, it was quiet only at night but now the morning sunshine flooded into the room through the bare, leafless boughs of the poplar. The poplar had been leafless too when Stoletov had left for Verkhnyaya Kamenka but then there were shiny sharp-tipped buds on the tree.

Stoletov felt sad as he moved alone through the empty flat. How did Varya live there? Surely she must find this silence, this lack of company, oppressive. The poor dear, looking at photographs of her loved ones, reading and writing letters, waiting for the holidays. . . . But she was not one to give in; Varya could be obstinate. She was not going to the place where her loved ones waited for her and where she herself, most probably, longed to go. . . .

Stoletov sat down at the desk and scribbled a few lines:

"Dearest Varya, I've been in Moscow on business. Flew there but going back by train. Dropped in for a moment in the hope of catching you at home. Can't wait; don't want to miss the train. Had a good trip, will tell you all details when I write. Love and kisses. Your Stepan."

He looked around for a place to put the note and slipped it under the cup. With one more glance around the room, he slammed the door behind him and ran down the stairs.

"Back to the station and drive like mad. The train leaves in seven minutes."

Andrei and Kovalev stood near the door, anxiously scanning the passengers coming along the platform. Where could Stoletov have got to? Surely he wasn't going to miss the train? The engine had been coupled long ago, the train's departure time had been announced by loud-speaker, yet there was no sign of him. The conductor shared their anxiety; climbing up the steps of the coach, she looked towards the station buildings.

"Here he is," she cried. "Running across the lines instead of using the tunnel. He'll manage it all right."

The train was already on the move when Andrei took Stoletov by the arm and helped him up the steps.

"Hm, what have you been up to, Stepan Demyanovich?" chuckled Kovalev. "We looked everywhere for you. In the restaurant, at the book-stall, in the post-office."

"I decided to drop in home," said Stoletov. "I thought I might catch my wife in but missed her. I expect she's at school. I meant to pick up a few books but didn't have time to dig them out, so I might as well not have gone."

The train was running fast; now they were among hills covered with forest; the line followed the winding course of a mountain river. The river ran too fast to have frozen; but near the bank where the current was slower the ice was piled up in a white fringe against the boulders.

Chapter Fifteen

1

They had only a week's happiness before them but Nikolai and Nina behaved as if they were setting up house together for the rest of their lives.

After seeing Andrei leave for the airport, Nikolai ran straight to hospital.

"Ready?" he asked, peeping into Nina's room. "I'll carry everything over. Just hand me that basket."

He tied a heavy bundle of books on to Nina's suitcase with a strap and shouldered the load. Then he picked up a light blanket roll and with his free hand took a small basket of odds-and-ends.

"Is that all?" he asked, looking round the room. "Let's go, then."

On the way it occurred to Nikolai that he ought to have tidied the hostel room which Andrei's departure had left in a complete mess. Now it was too late: Nina was hurrying along beside him, quiet with suppressed excitement; he couldn't very well leave her kicking her heels in the street while the chambermaid tidied up.

"I'm afraid the room's in a terrible mess," he said as they went upstairs. "Don't be angry with me for having nothing ready."

The only preparation Nikolai had managed to make was to buy something for supper. His pocket bulged with parcels and he held a long golden-brown loaf under his arm.

"Let me carry the loaf," Nina suggested as they came along the street. "You might crush it."

But Nikolai would not let her take it. He wanted her to walk beside him swinging her arms: a wife walking beside her husband who was carrying all the load of their married life.

The room really did look a wreck: the floor was littered with old newspapers, the beds were unmade, there was a mountain of manuscripts and proofs on the writing desk. The place had never been so untidy; Nikolai stopped just inside the door, overcome with confusion.

But Nina, far from being abashed, seemed to enjoy the disorder. She slipped off her coat, rolled up her sleeves and set about tidying up, snapping out orders to Nikolai: "Go and get a broom," "Find a duster," "Put the suitcase where you usually keep it." She examined the room with a critical eye, declaring that the furniture was arranged in a very institutional way and that it ought to be shifted to make the place cosier.

"Go and ask Sasha to give us a small table: we can't work and eat at the same table. And let's have those boots out of the locker. We'll put them in the bottom drawer in the wardrobe. It's empty anyway. Then we can use the locker as a sideboard."

Nikolai thought that rearranging the room would be complicated and would take so long that Andrei would be back before it was finished. But Nina insisted on his asking Sasha for the table; a table was found; and, besides, a narrow sofa and two upholstered chairs. Nikolai and Sasha, with the help of the chambermaid, carried everything into the room; the chambermaid grumbled that it only needed a woman to appear on the scene for everything in the room to appear wrong; the two young men had never asked for a thing.

"All right, all right, you keep quiet and go and get the chairs," said Sasha impatiently.

Nina lost no time in moving the beds into a corner; she tried to turn the wardrobe round. The wardrobe was heavy; Nina grew red in the face from her exertions; she could not manage it alone.

"Ninotchka! You might strain yourself," cried Nikolai in horror. "Move aside and let me do it."

He and Sasha easily moved the wardrobe; where it had stood a patch of dust lay as thick as wool on a sheep's back; the stud Andrei had lost the day he arrived shone in the midst of it.

"So that's what you call cleaning," said Sasha as the dust swirled all over the room. "Bring a pail of water and give this floor a good scrub. Tomorrow I'll look under the wardrobe in every room."

The maid went off for the pail, slamming the door behind her; Nina pointed out where she wanted the rest of the furniture moved.

"What a lovely little sofa," she said. "Soft chairs, too. I hope you won't take them all away when I move out."

Nina spoke sadly as she recalled how short her stay was to be in that room. Nikolai caught her mood and Sasha, sensing the situation, promised that the new furniture would remain.

Nikolai found that rearranging a room can be done very quickly. In less than an hour the maid had scrubbed the floor and the room looked clean and tidy. Looking round, Nina proposed asking some friends in for a house-warming party. Nikolai recalled that he had bought plenty of good things; a fresh loaf with a nice crisp crust, ham in abundance, a big hunk of gruyère cheese, butter. The shopping, incidentally, had got him the name of being tied to his wife's apron-strings; this made him angry at first, though when he came to think it over he decided it wasn't worth bothering about.

What happened was this: he was waiting while the shop-assistant sliced the ham when Yuri Sharov hurried up and bought a sausage sandwich at the counter. Slipping his parcel into his pocket, he challenged Nikolai to a game of chess. Nikolai declined, adding proudly that he was expecting his wife to move in that evening. That made Sharov laugh; most fellows became tied to their wives' apron-strings when they got married, he said, and Nikolai had not escaped that fate.

Sharov, probably, didn't mean any harm; he may even have been a bit envious; he was courting a girl but hadn't plucked up the courage to propose—he was in the same situation as Nikolai had been once with Nina. All the same the remark stung Nikolai: was it really so noticeable that Nina bossed him?

So now, when Nina suggested asking people in that evening, Nikolai decided to find out whether Sharov was right.

"We'll decide whom to invite later," he said peremptorily. Now let's have supper."

Nina went meekly to their new "sideboard," squatted on her heels and took out some plates. From her suitcase she took a prettily embroidered table-cloth and a set of napkins and from the basket some home-made *pirozhki*, eggs and rissoles.

"Where can I get some boiling water?" she asked Nikolai, picking up the tea-pot. "No, don't bother, I'll go for it. You rest a bit."

If only Yuri Sharov could see him sitting at that prettily laid table with Nina serving him, pouring tea and choosing the tastiest of the *pirozhki* for him. Apron-strings, my foot!

"Don't think I'm no good at housekeeping," said Nina. "I can do everything. 'D'you like these *pirozhki*? I baked them myself in the hospital kitchen. And I can make soup too—mushroom soup, meat broth, any kind you like."

After supper Nina cleared the table and washed up; Nikolai dried as if it were the most important thing in the world. Nina meticulously wrapped the rest of the ham and the cheese in paper and hung the packet out of the window at the end of a piece of string, something that Andrei and Nikolai had never done—they simply put the left-overs in the cupboard. Nina made the beds, beating the pillows up and folding the blankets neatly. Only at home, only in his childhood, when his mother used to make his bed, had Nikolai seen beds look so inviting. Nina put out the top light and covered the table lamp with her scarf; the room at once became smaller, more intimate; the dark window, outside which the autumn gale howled, disappeared; the whole world disappeared except that room where the two of them were.

"Ninotchka, my darling, how wonderful it is to be with you."

Everything was quite different for them that night—their love-making was less hurried than it had been in the hospital room. And they spoke to each other straight from the heart, going into details about things that were highly interesting and important to them though to nobody else.

"D'you mean to say he never remembered you when you were little? Not once? Not on your birthday or on New Year's Day?"

"Not once, Ninotchka. Mother and I were on our own, except of course for Andrei and his father. Boris Ivanovich is a very, very good man."

"Did your mother hate your father when he left her?"

"I don't know. No, I don't think she did. She felt terribly hurt, that's all."

"I hate him, though. If he ever comes here and dares to call to see us, I'll turn him out."

"He's been here, Ninotchka. I realized then what sort of a man he is."

"Poor little Nik. How awful for you to know you have such a man for a father."

"It is. And it's something I can talk about only to you..."

"You must tell me everything, always. I love you so much. What soft hair you have and it's got a lovely smell."

"And your hair smells of hay with just a whiff of medicine..."

"And what if I started using perfume? Say I borrowed some scent from Zina? Why, you'd mix me up with her!"

"Mix you up with Zina? That's what you deserve for saying such things. And that, and that..."

"Oh, stop, Nik. I'll scream if you go on. I'll yell for the chambermaid. She'll bring you to your senses..."

Could such happiness last a whole lifetime? Were they going to be together like this all the time until Andrei returned from Moscow? Would it be like this later on when they had their new flat?

Everything went wrong for Nikolai on the day it became known in the factory that Stolelov and Andrei were on their way back: one of the turners spoiled several castings: there was a mistake in one of the blue prints on the new order and Nikolai did not spot it and passed the blue print on to a turner, with the result that there was trouble; the personnel department transferred two girls from Nikolai's section to the new shop. The girls did not want to leave, they even cried as they begged to be allowed to remain at their present jobs. Nikolai also wanted them to stay and had a violent argument with the personnel manager. Nothing came of it, however, so Nikolai went to complain to Syurtukov.

"They were quite right to take them," said Syurtukov, not looking up from his work at the bench. "An old worker like you ought to share trained hands with a new shop."

"Me an old worker?" Nikolai said incredulously, tapping himself on the chest. "How long have I been that? I've worked only four months at the factory. I've just managed to get my own personnel problems settled."

"Four months is no short time," Syurtukov retorted calmly. "It's not right for you to be playing the pauper. You've had your workers with you for quite a long time and your section's gone up to the top. Shame on you, not sharing with the new shops."

"Very well, then," said Nikolai restrainedly. "I'll have a talk with Comrade Stolelov when he comes tomorrow. I don't know whether he'll agree with you. I don't intend to squander my workers; they didn't fall into my lap, you know."

"All right, you have a talk with Stolelov," Syurtukov said amiably. "But he won't support you, you'll see."

Feeling upset by this conversation and disappointed by all the events of that day, Nikolai made his way home after work. As he walked, he reflected that this was to be the last evening, the last night with Nina in the Stalingrad; with Andrei's return, Nina would have to go back to the hospital, and then they would only be able to see each other for short spells at a time.

Poor Nina, he thought with tenderness and longing. It was worse for her than for him. He had Andrei's company, but she had to listen to that chatterbox Zina.

Nikolai entered the room feeling saddened and softened by these reflections; he embraced Nina tenderly when she opened the door to him.

"See how early I am," he said with a kiss. "I simply rushed back. You've only just got back yourself, haven't you?"

Nina was still in her hospital smock, her attaché case lay on the dining table and she had her kerchief in her hands.

"No, I came back early today. I've been studying. Now I must run over to the hospital for a minute: Maria Borisovna has promised to have a look at my lecture."

For the past fortnight Nina had been preparing a lecture for a nurses' training course. Everything was written out, the first pages memorized. At first in secret, then with Nikolai as her only listener, Nina rehearsed the whole lecture, trying to adopt the voice and manner of her favourite lecturer at college. Everything was ready; Nikolai had approved of it all

and now it turned out that Nina would have to spend their last evening at the hospital again, working on that lecture.

"I thought we'd spend this evening at home," Nikolai said sadly. "You haven't forgotten that Andrei's coming back tomorrow, have you?"

"I won't be more than an hour. You know how important it is for me. Maria Borisovna is always so busy and she could only spare me the time tonight: her husband's going somewhere and she's promised to come down specially to look at my lecture. Take things easy till I come back. Just for an hour. I simply must get Maria Borisovna's advice. I want the lecture to be so good that it will really grip the audience."

"Audience!" smiled Nikolai. "A few girls from over the lake, Tonya and a couple of housewives. And you're prepared to forget everything else in the world for such an 'audience.' But I won't let you go alone; I'll walk with you to the hospital."

They walked arm in arm along the dark streets. Nikolai told Nina of his chapter of accidents and now they seemed less serious. Did it really matter if they took away the two turners? Was it really such a catastrophe that one had mucked up a job? As for the mistake in the blue print, he'd have something strong to say about the work of the designing office at the next production meeting. What did they think they were up to?

They reached the hospital. There was a light burning in the consulting room of the duty-doctor. That meant Maria Borisovna was waiting for Nina.

"Don't go away," said Nina. "I'll soon be back. Sit in the waiting-room."

There were two girls sitting on the porch and when Nikolai and Nina mounted the steps they leaped up and made a dash for Nina.

"We came to see you, Nina Sergeyevna. Please help her. Maria Borisovna wouldn't."

The girl who spoke wore a large white shawl. She pointed to her companion who was similarly clad. The other girl did not open her mouth; her eyes were full of entreaty and she looked as if she was on the point of tears.

"She left school when she was in the fifth form and Maria Borisovna won't take her. She told her she ought to do two years' more schooling. But by the time she finishes, the nursing course may be over. And she's terribly keen. It's the dream of her life."

Nina looked stern and resolute.

"There's nothing I can do to help you, Katya," she said. "We have a very strict rule—only to take girls with seven years' schooling. We haven't the right to make exceptions."

"But she's awfully clever, Nina Sergeyevna. She's terrible: she reads everything, she even writes poetry, word of honour she does. Five of us living on the other side of the lake have enrolled for the course, and she's our friend. It's a shame to leave her out."

"Then let her go to the evening school for young workers," said Nina. "Then you can all come across the lake together. Good night."

Nikolai marvelled at Nina's manner of speaking. Her voice was firm and unflinching, her bearing authoritative, her face serious.

With an involuntary feeling of respect Nikolai flung open the door for her and Nina floated into her hospital with regal dignity. In the dark empty waiting room she turned round to Nikolai and said triumphantly: "Did you hear that? And you dared to make fun of my audience."

2

It was in Moscow that Kovalev suggested Andrei should share his flat with him.

"Why don't you move in, Andrei Borisovich? I've a big place, my family's gone for good and I'm lonely on my own. . . . Take whichever room suits you and fix it up for yourself."

Andrei agreed. They decided that he should move in as soon as they returned; when the car drew up at the factory gates Kovalev handed Andrei a latch key.

"I must drop into the shop for a moment. You go straight home, make yourself comfortable and rest."

But Andrei preferred to go to the print-shop first, hand over his presents and take a look at the issue of the *Tribuna* that had been made up in his absence.

Lights were burning in the editorial office and in the print-shop; from the corridor Andrei heard the clatter of the press. So not everybody had gone home. Andrei suddenly realized how much he had missed that noise, the smell of ink, the company of his fellow-workers. He opened the door of his office and saw them all at once: Vanya, Valya, Polina and the two girls sitting in a row at the table. The room was exceptionally tidy and looked quite festive.

"Our information was correct," cried Vanya exultantly, hurrying forward to greet Andrei. "Welcome home."

"We knew the moment you'd left the train," said Polina gaily. "Our contact on the railwaymen's paper rang us up as we'd arranged."

"You should never reveal the source of your information," Vanya said disapprovingly. "You're always blurting out things. You don't know how to keep editorial secrets."

Andrei put down his suitcase and shook hands with everyone, he looked into the print-shop, greeting the printer and ran his eye over the damp, newly-pulled proofs. The exciting feeling of having come home did not desert him. He noticed every novelty and every old familiar detail: the pile of used half-tones on the window-sill, the unpainted plank floor which they had so often promised themselves to do something about but never did, the lampshade with the chipped edge.

He opened the suitcase and ceremoniously handed Polina a small narrow box tied with ribbon.

"A greeting from Moscow, Polina Georgiyevna," he said. "Some finery for you."

Polina opened the case and blushed with pleasure: by electric light the bronze roses glittered like gold.

"Thank you, Andrei Borisovich. Quick, girls, come and see what lovely things I've got."

But the girls were gazing at their bead bags; no one in all Verkhnyaya Kamenka had anything like them. Valya, suppressing her

disappointment, turned over the contents of the sewing basket; the editor must think she was quite an old thing buying her a present like that!

"The tie's first rate," said Vanya. "I've a new shirt with mauve stripes; it'll go beautifully with it."

How pleasant it was to do others a good turn. Andrei was glad that he had thought of bringing presents; it made him somehow feel older than anybody else in the room; the only embarrassment he felt was with the printer. The old man thanked him somewhat reservedly but at once stuck his cigarette into the new holder.

Then, after locking up the print-shop and the office, they all went over to the Stalingrad together.

"There's no light burning in your room," said Vanya, looking up. "Nikolai Nikolayevich probably doesn't know you've arrived."

Andrei went upstairs. On the way he met Sasha, who was smiling all over his freckled face.

"Hello, Andrei Borisovich. Glad to see you back. Your young friends have just gone out. We haven't had time to tidy up after them."

Sasha was genuinely glad to see him and Andrei shook hands with special warmth. A good fellow, Sasha. The things he did were modest and unnoticed but he did them with love and enthusiasm and took real trouble over the people who lived in the Stalingrad.

"Tidy up? As if that mattered," Andrei said. "I've come for a minute, that's all. I'm moving."

"Moving? When did you manage to get another place to live in?"

"It was arranged in Moscow—by special decision of the Council of Ministers."

Sasha looked incredulous but Andrei's face was quite straight.

"W-e-e-ell, if a man distinguishes himself it's quite feasible that the Council of Ministers should do something for him. What flat are you getting?"

"Haven't decided which to take. For the time being I'm borrowing a room from the manager of the first machine shop."

Sasha thought for a moment then his face lit up and he said:

"Kovalev, you mean? He's got a lovely flat though it's farther from the factory than the Stalingrad. Take that corner room with the balcony—that'd suit you, it's nice and light."

Still uncertain whether Andrei was in earnest or not, Sasha accompanied him to the door of the room.

"Are you moving tonight?"

"Yes."

Andrei entered the room. Nikolai and Nina had just left. The window was open and the autumn breeze played with the curtains; Andrei's books and notebooks were neatly stacked on the writing desk; a branch of cedar stood in a vase that was new to Andrei. There was a round table and a small sofa, and the beds were concealed behind the wardrobe—those two had settled in comfortably. They probably felt wretched at the prospect of leaving their little nest. . . .

Andrei, however, did not feel at all badly about leaving the room. He actually wanted to go—to get farther away from various memories, from everything that he had mistaken for happiness, only to find it turn

into sorrow and disappointment, from that window, those walls, every crack in which he had studied and restudied during bitter sleepless nights.

"Nik, go straight to the hospital and bring Nina back," he wrote. "I've promised Kovalev that I'll go and live at his place. He finds it dull being alone in that big flat; he's invited me to share. You live here and stop making a scape-goat out of yourself—you're quite wrong if you take me for an injured lamb that has to be nurtured and shepherded. I'm going to shepherd Kovalev and live royally in a magnificent room. You'll come and see me and I'll return your visit. Love to you both from all in Moscow and from me. Andrei."

He left the note on the table with his parcel from Moscow, switched out the light and closed the door behind him.

"Wait for me and I'll return," he sang out to Sasha as he handed him the key. "I must pick up my things but I've no time now."

He clattered down the stairs. He wanted above all to avoid running into Nikolai and the emotional scene that it would entail. Let the two of them be alone when they go into raptures about their luck—he'd go to Kovalev and start a new life.

He went up the staircase at Kovalev's house and rang the bell. Kovalev opened the door at once: it was clear that he had been waiting for his new neighbour to arrive.

"I was afraid you'd changed your mind," he said. "I've got used to the idea of having you in the next room but I was beginning to think I was going to be left alone again in this empty place."

The whole flat was lit up and the corner room—formerly the dining-room—had been got ready for Andrei; a divan-bed, writing table and a bookshelf had been added to the furniture. The dining table and the piano had been moved into another room. All associations with the past had been swept away and disposed of.

"I'm running a bath for you and the kettle's on. We'll take baths and then have tea and relax. Agreed?"

Kovalev looked at Andrei with some trepidation: how was he going to get on with this fellow who was young enough to have been his son? Would they become friends or would they live separate lives, each keeping to his own room?

Andrei, however, had no intention of keeping to himself. He at once felt quite at home in his new room. He tossed his suitcase on the divan, hung his jacket over the back of a chair and went into the bathroom to see whether the stove needed more firewood. He decided it did.

"Where do you keep the wood?" he called. "From now on I'm going to take charge of chopping and carrying the fire wood for the bathroom."

3

Nikolai saw Nina back to the hospital, put her things in a corner of the room and left, followed by Zina's scornful glance.

"Good-bye to happiness," said Zina. "Not to mine, of course. To yours. Actually, I'm very glad to see you back."

Still in her kerchief and overcoat, Nina sat at the table and burst into tears. It was so sad to have to leave the Stalingrad, to part with

Nikolai, with the room they had grown to think of as home. And as she cried, Zina let fly at Nikolai: fine husband he was, not able to arrange somewhere for his wife to live. He wasn't a husband, he was a misfortune. Zina would never marry anyone who couldn't provide her with decent living conditions.

"I don't care who you marry," snapped Nina, raising her tear-stained face. "Nikolai's a fine man, very fine. . . . You just can't understand, you're not capable of such feelings as Nikolai's."

"If those feelings of his make the person he loves sob her heart out, I don't give a drat for them," said Zina firmly.

"But don't you understand? He can't let down his best friend, specially when his friend's unhappy."

"Everyone has the right to found his own happiness on the unhappiness of another," said Zina solemnly. "You think I made that up, don't you? I didn't, they're the words of an old poet—Igor Severyanin. I think that's the right sentiment."

"Your Igor Severyanin was an idiot to write such rot," yelled Nina. "And you're just as bad for repeating them."

"Thank you," said Zina and got up. "I'll leave you to think over whether you're right, insulting someone who's feeling sorry for you."

Zina went out, leaving Nina to her thoughts. Of course, she didn't want to find her own happiness on someone else's unhappiness, but would Andrei really be so very unhappy? Was he going through such a bad time as Nikolai thought? Would it take him so long to get over losing that red-cheeked Lyuba Zvonaryeva?

There was an impatient knock at the door; Nina did not reply to it, did not even look up. A nurse, probably, to call her to work. Well, she wouldn't go. Let another doctor go. She wanted to be left in peace. Hadn't she the right to a fit of the dumps? But the knock was repeated; then the door opened, and in burst Nikolai.

"Nina! You alone?" he shouted. "Listen, I've got marvellous news. Andrei's gone to live with Kovalev. You can come back."

He picked up the suitcase, the basket and the blanket roll and dashed back to the door.

"Come on, come on. It was Andrei's own idea. He understood. Mother may have told him. But he's not at all put out. Just read his note and you'll see."

What was there to read, what to see? All Nina knew was that they should have been living together long ago so that she would not have to listen to Zina's poisonous remarks about her "vagrant-husband."

They walked back to the Stalingrad. Sasha handed them the key with a straight face.

"Stay on, I've no objections," he said drily. "But don't forget to register the change of address in the proper way tomorrow."

And so they were back in "their" room where the window was still open and the wind went on playing with the curtains. Nikolai showed Nina Andrei's note; they read it together, sitting with their arms round each other on the sofa. Wasn't it a shame to be so happy when Andrei had to go and live with a stranger?

"But you said yourself that Kovalev is a very nice man."

Nikolai tried to recall when he had spoken so favourably of Kovalev. He must have done so for Nina to be so certain of it. Andrei probably would be more comfortable where he was, he now had a big room to himself; he'd be able to ruminate and write his poetry undisturbed; after all, you need solitude for creative work, and at the Stalingrad Andrei was never alone.

"But it suits us to be together, doesn't it?" said Nikolai with a hug. "I don't disturb you when you're working on your lectures, do I?"

"I just couldn't work alone. I have to have you near me so I can ask your advice now and then.... Let's rearrange the place as we had it before. Quick."

Nikolai, however, wanted to go and see Andrei straight away; he wanted to talk to him and to find out whether the new place suited him.

"You unpack, Ninochka. I'll run over to him for a minute."

"I'm coming too," said Nina decisively. "I also want to see Andrei and find out how he is there."

She put on the new knitted hat, the new scarf, the new mittens--they were so pretty that she couldn't wait for the winter to put on her presents. Off they ran, holding each other's hands and making plans about what to do if there were no lights on at Kovalev's place.

Stoletov had just telephoned to congratulate Andrei and to wish him all happiness in his new home.

"Ivan Konstantinovich and I are having tea together," he said. "Just the two of us, sitting up late like old fogeys. The twins are asleep. Well, good night, see you at work tomorrow."

"Good night, Stepan Dem'yanovich."

How good it felt to lie on a sofa after a long train journey--a sofa that did not bump and rock like a berth in the train. The room was quiet except for an occasional cough from Kovalev next door; though the light was still on and he held a rustling newspaper in his hands, Andrei's eyelids kept drooping. Something seemed to be glittering and sparkling in front of them--the bronze roses that he had given to Polina. Andrei reached for them but they tinkled, rolled away from him and fell to the floor.

"Andrei Borisovich," Kovalev was tapping on the door. "Are you awake? You have visitors."

Springing up without realizing where he was, Andrei threw open the door. Nikolai and Nina stood in the hall smiling confusedly.

"We've come to see you," said Nikolai, stepping forward. "You can't have thought I'd turn in without coming over to see you."

Nikolai paid no attention to Andrei's tousled hair or to the fact that he was bare-foot and stripped to the waist. He did not notice how Andrei dashed back into the room to grab the rest of his clothes. He followed Andrei with only one feeling--a feeling of guilt about his own happiness, a happiness that even separation from his best friend could not damp. They had been together all their lives and now, suddenly, they were apart.

Dressing hurriedly, Andrei called to Nina that he would be ready in a moment.

"Right away, Nina. Come in. I'm sorry about the mess."

He turned round and saw Nikolai's guilty face. It was not the foreman of the turnery, not Nikolai Nikolayevich Zhukov, mechanical engineer, but a kid known as Nik, his schoolboy chum who was looking at him with so much concern in his grey eyes. Andrei realized at once everything that Nikolai was thinking and feeling, he understood Nikolai's perplexity and it made him glad.

"I was sure you'd come," he admitted. "I've been waiting all evening for you, though actually I fell asleep. Why don't you come in, Nina? I'm quite fit to be seen now."

He shook hands with Nina, put his arm over Nikolai's shoulder and invited them to sit down at the table. Then he sat on the divan with his bare feet tucked under him.

"See what a fine place I've got? Nice room, don't you think? Better than yours. So don't think of me as a miserable exile."

"I don't," said Nina. There was a resolute look on her face. "I must admit frankly that I've always thought it was high time Nikolai and I had a place of our own. I think that way now too. But I'm worried because Nikolai thinks we've treated you badly somehow. Let's get it straight: Are we really behaving selfishly or is everything all right?"

Nina looked serious as she waited for Andrei to reply. Her brows were drawn together in a single line, her full lips were tightly compressed; her fists were clenched.

Yes, she really did love Nikolai, Andrei thought enviously. The explanation she wanted was not for herself but for Nikolai. She knew very well that everything was all right. He, Andrei, was the selfish one, a real monster of egoism; with all his private worries he hadn't noticed that he was standing in the way of other people.

These thoughts just flashed through his mind; he had no compunctions in speaking them aloud.

"I'm awfully sorry, you two, that I didn't realize earlier I ought to move. It's always like that: if a chap thinks too much about his own misfortunes he becomes blind to what's going on around him. Why didn't you give me a good jolt earlier, Nina, so that I'd stop thinking I was the only person on earth?"

Nina went on looking at Andrei severely.

"I'm glad you've admitted your mistake," she said. "Now you've got to convince Nikolai that it really was a mistake."

"I'll do that straightaway. Stop being mad at me. I'm guilty, I recognize that."

Andrei jumped up from the divan, buttoned up his coat and stretched out his hand to Nina.

"Shake! And stop defending Nikolai against me. I'll drop in on you tomorrow. Is that all right, Nina?"

"Please come," said Nina. "I'll make some fritters. It'll have to be on the electric ring, though. We haven't got a kitchen at the Stalingrad."

Andrei found himself thinking that Nina was a fine, good-hearted girl. She had one odd trait, though: she was too quick to jump to the defensive. She was like one of those sparrows you sometimes saw that ruffled their feathers and thought everybody would be frightened of them.

"Don't bother about the fritters. I'll come in any case."

He flung his arms round the two of them and drew them to the divan where they all sat cross-legged.

It was great fun sitting there -- all three -- eating sweets from Moscow, looking round the room which had so suddenly become "home" to Andrei and listening to his account of Moscow, about how he had spent his evenings with his father and Maria Mikhailovna who had questioned him about Nina and Nikolai.

"Did you see my father?" Nikolai asked.

"I did," said Andrei and at once all of them felt uncomfortable. "I saw him several times."

"What did he talk about with you?"

"He asked me whether we were as good friends as we used to be. He probably thought you were sore at me about that article. I told him we were good friends and always would be."

4

Early one morning before the sun had risen, Andrei woke up and looked out of the window. Something white was stirring beyond the window panes as if a heavy curtain had been lowered on the outside. Springing out of bed, Andrei opened the window and breathed in the clean, fresh smell of snow. The snow fell like a thick shroud, slowly and noiselessly. It had evidently been falling all night for now it lay on the ground, the roofs, the branches of the trees.

All desire for sleep had left Andrei. He switched on the light and started writing a letter to his father. He gave him his news, that he had sent a long article to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* a few days ago, that he played chess with Kovalev every evening and that he had ordered a new suit.

"Please tell Maria Mikhailovna that Nikolai and Nina are well and working hard. Nikolai's section is soon getting a new order parts for Kovalev's machine. Nikolai's received the blue prints and is studying them. He wants to be ready in good time so that the work can go straight ahead. Of course, it wasn't easy for him when he learned what tricks Zhukov had been playing with the Kovalev invention. Now he wants to redeem his father's guilt. . . . No more news except that we had snow here last night."

His letter finished, Andrei went outside. The sun was rising; the morning hooter had just gone. A snow plough was driving its broad blade through the downy drifts, cutting a way to the factory; with happy shouts school children were clearing away the snow round the school. As he walked on, Andrei was astonished to see how complete had been the transformation during the night: yesterday everything around had been brown and ugly, with the bare bushes trembling in the wind, and the frozen surface of the lake a cold mirror of blue; but today everything was white, downy and sparkling.

For a second Andrei remembered that during the summer Lyuba had advised him to buy skis and had promised to show him the hill where there was a splendid place for making jumps. Now he would not be going skiing with Lyuba: she was married, her name was no longer Zvonaryeva but Nikitina; Andrei had no intention of being odd man out.

Before going to the office, Andrei called on Nikolai. The shop looked bright and clean with the sunshine pouring in and dancing brightly on the metal lathes and piles of completed parts, and lighting sparks in the stones of the girls' ear-rings. Next to the board of honour hung a large glass-fronted frame containing the photographs of exemplary workers.

Andrei stood for a few moments at this frame; familiar faces smiled at him from it with friendly understanding. The only exception was Dusya Syurtukova—the camera had given her a mocking, supercilious look.

"Oh, I'm glad you've come," said Nikolai, catching sight of Andrei. "Come over here, I've something to show you."

He led Andrei to his desk and took out a folder on which was written "Shrew." Inside the folder lay blue prints and a sheet of paper covered with notes in various hands. These were the rationalization proposals put forward by the turners Vladimir Nazarenko, Yelena Protasova, "Uncle" Misha and a young worker who was a new-comer to the section.

"D'you see," asked Nikolai. "These mean a saving of hundreds of working hours. And there are more to come."

He shut the folder and laid it in front of him.

"Don't imagine my knowledge of the Kovalev machine is limited to the parts that we have to work on in this section," said Nikolai. "I know that machine down to the last screw. While you were in Moscow the designing office showed me everything. And I've studied the whole affair in much closer detail than your article was able to cover. I've seen the prototype lying out there in the factory grounds. . . . Perhaps you think it was all the same to me how the campaign for Kovalev's machine ended. Believe me, Andrei, no one wished you success more than I did. . . . And no one feels as guilty before Kovalev as I do. . . ."

Nikolai's voice shook; he looked down and gave all his attention to sharpening a pencil. He went on chipping away at it until the lead broke; Andrei took the pencil from Nikolai and shook him warmly by the hand.

"Stop it, Nik. Get all that out of your mind," he said. "You know very well that a son can't be held responsible for his father's behaviour, especially in circumstances like yours. That Zhukov lives his own life and you're in no way responsible for his conduct. You'd do better to tell me what innovations you're going to introduce into your work on this order?"

"Above all I'm going to try and make up for the time lost through that other Zhukov's fault. In our own section we've worked out quite a lot of interesting things if we're not let down by the other shops. If we manage to make everybody work in step with us, the first machine ought to be leaving the factory in the spring."

He showed Andrei the proposed pledge of Socialist emulation which the turners had drawn up in advance; Andrei said he would like to print it in the *Tribuna*.

"We must think which shop would be the best for you to compete with over this order. Perhaps the foundry or the forge?"

"Yes, we've thought of that too; we'll go through with it all right. Especially if the *Tribuna* helps us."

Andrei went from shop to shop, talking to the workers, making arrangements for articles and items for the *Tribuna*, jotting down names,

figures, facts. Then he recollected that he intended to drop in at the club to see a rehearsal of *Wit Works Woe*. He wanted to see how a young draughtsman from the designing office would shape in his favourite role. Badly, he expected—as badly as he had played Chatsky himself. A difficult role, all he managed to make of it was an irascible dandy. He'd act better in it now, though: he understood how Chatsky must have felt when he learned of Sofia's betrayal and of her love for Molchalin. No, that was nonsense, Lyuba was no Sofia, her husband was no Molchalin and he himself was hardly a Chatsky. . . .

At the club, Andrei was told that the rehearsal had been put off. He heard the manager of the club telling Stoletov in the dark empty hall that it was impossible to go on using the building and that work ought to be started immediately on a real House of Culture.

"Our library's in a hopeless condition. Just look at the way the books are kept in that gorge of shelves and cupboards. We need a room to dance in, lounges. We've a billiard table but nowhere to put it; we had to give it to the restaurant. The brass band practises in a room next to the reading-room; there's nowhere for people to learn to play the piano."

"Play the piano?" Stoletov interrupted. "D'you mean to say there are people who want to learn to play the piano?"

His thoughts leaped to Varya: how good it would be to arrange a large bright music room, without any furniture if needs be, with nothing but a piano in it. Through the window there would be a sweeping view over the lake with the tops of the pines beyond and the distant mountains. In the spring the window would stand open and into the room would flow the resinous scent of the forest. . . .

Now everything outside smelt of snow. A cloud floated slowly far overhead against the starlit sky. It still glowed with the touch of a sunbeam that reached it, though the sun had sunk below the mountains. The snow crunched underfoot; columns of smoke rose straight into the air above the roof tops. The hooter went; it sounded unusually loud and piercing in the frosty air. A dark flood of workers poured through the factory gates to where the lit-up buses stood waiting.

As Andrei walked along the street he thought about the things he had to do. First of all he would have to set about editing the *Tribuna* properly: during all the recent excitements he had worked anyhow, without the flame of enthusiasm. The last issue was dull, with traces of resemblance to the paper of Chumov's days. He would have to get everybody with any spirit in him to contribute to the paper, people who loved their work and their factory. And poets, too; somewhere, quiet, in secret from everybody, poets must be writing verses about what they held most precious and beloved in life.

Perhaps behind that very window, under that softly glowing green lampshade, a young poet was sitting before a sheet of paper in agonized struggle to express his thoughts in beautiful phrases. Everyone who lived at Verkhnyaya Kamenka, who read the *Tribuna* ought to be able to find in its pages his own thoughts, his own feelings. Did its editor, Andrei Korolev, live and work and feel differently from all others? Of course, he didn't! He lived and thought just like his comrades and friends.

By the time Andrei reached the square it was quiet and empty. Floodlights were trained on the faded snow-dusted portraits that had been

hanging on the railings since the previous spring. Standing close together looking at them were two figures. Andrei recognized them at once in the light.

"Hello, you two," he shouted. "What are you looking at?"

He crossed to the centre of the square.

"When's Nik's face going up here?" asked Nina. "And what about mine? D'you think we'll ever get there?"

"I'm sure we will," Andrei said, and took them by the arm. "Anyway, we'll have a shot at it. Come along, see me home."

Together they walked along the long white road. Sometimes it was as smooth as a table-top, sometimes it was pitted with deep holes and hollows, and sometimes it was piled high with drifting snow. But they kept on their way, through the drifts and over the hollows, and when the road was even they strode along fast, keeping in step. The first frost of the winter nipped their faces, the snow squeaked underfoot, and the wind at their backs aided them and sped them on their way.

Translated by R.P.

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